The Lucky Ones

Posted on



Sackful of jaggery being delivered to a customer

“Complete isolation, no signal on my phone and no internet…WHAT AM I GOING TO DO!??!” my mind screamed. It seemed like I was in the middle of nowhere, far away from civilisation. We trudged along the gravel path through the forest and then suddenly a roof appeared from above the foliage. Could it be possible that we had found a village amidst this oblivion?…

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We looked up and the towering trees created an ominous cover around us. The sky was overcast with a hint of rain. The surrounding hills thick with vegetation created the perfect scene for my imagination to go wild! Yet, Ketalapaththala Gama (village), which is where we were – was neither ominous nor oblivious to the outside

world. It was a way of life where each home was self-sufficient sans modern technology in its day to day requirements.

Situated along the border of Sinharajah, one could say that the village was an extension of the largest rainforest in Sri Lanka. Natural springs created pools of water along the path. Immersing our feet in the cooling water gave us temporary respite from the bloodsucking leeches who attacked our feet with a coordinated plan (it seemed!). However, you soon get used to that and the pristine beauty of the surrounding enraptures you.

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A local resident explained to us that the Ketalapaththala Gama is an ancient village because if he traced back his lineage from the maternal side, his ancestors too were from this village. Furthermore any person from the surrounding area could name at least one relative back to this Gama, thereby highlighting the importance of this village to the area. Usually when one thinks of a village, it is of one where houses are situated relatively close to each other and a small town in the centre. However, in the case of Ketalapaththala each house has a plot of land that could be of the extent from one to two acres and the interspersing forest. Neighbours would take about 20-45 minutes to reach each other. Furthermore there is no central town or shops and no buses run down the somewhat dilapidated road, therefore residents have to walk a distance of six to eight kilometres to get to a town.

While as out of towners we found the walk quite strenuous, for the residents of Ketalapaththala the walk was part of their daily lives and you would see school children, some bare foot and others either in slippers or shoes walking briskly to their destination. This 12-kilometre walk (both ways) is not something they think about nor do they feel it while they chatter with their friends and enjoy the innocence of life. At one point we met an elderly lady balancing a sack of rice on her head and another bag in her hand. She was returning home from the market. She did not even touch the sack as she climbed the steep path! Her body adjusted itself automatically according to the surface of the road.

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The houses in this village were varied, some were modest clay houses and others were cemented. But one aspect was uniform across, where each family had a multi-crop ‘home garden’. The land consisted of tea, banana, betel, arecanut, kitul and other such varieties but the major crop was tea. Family members work in these fields and take time off their usual work to pluck the tender tea leaves. What is unusual here is that males too pluck tea as opposed to the up country where only females pluck tea, which is what we are accustomed to. The tea is then stored in the main room of the house until the tea lorry comes to collect the bags so that these could be weighed and sent to the tea processing factories. At the designated time each house brings out the sacks filled with tea and places it at the side of the road to await the truck.

Usually, the residents of the village also engage in cottage industries such as the production of *kitul pani* (treacle) and *hakuru* (jaggery), however it depends on the season that the kitul flower comes to bloom. Therefore during the off season residents store a bottle or two of *kitul pani* in case of an emergency as it is known to have exceptional medicinal properties. As we continued on our walk we were met by a group of people carrying large bags filled with *hakuru*. We could just make out the shape of the jaggery. Having collected the required number of *hakuru* from all the producers in the village they were making a delivery to a customer.

The sound of a nearby river resonated in our ears. Turning off along a foot path, we literally waded through tall grass and shrubs and came out on to the sandy banks of the river. The water was flowing over boulders creating mini pools. The place was quiet except for the sound of gushing water and insects. It was pure bliss to just sit and think…

It is surprising for us to think that these people live without the luxuries of modern life, the village is notified of pending meetings and functions through a notice board which is placed at a central location, something we would not even imagine at this day and age. At night the village is in darkness except for the light of the lamps as there is no electricity. But who are we to say how life should be? The people of this village live a content life. Passing a family of Giant Squirrel eating a ripe jackfruit and a group of Purple Faced Langurs jumping from tree to tree, we left Ketalapaththala village and headed back towards the main road. Passing lush green paddy fields, we soon came across a tea sorting point where collected tea from the various growers were weighed and sent to the factory. Momentarily… I was taken back to the tea growers at Ketalapaththala. As we headed back to so called ‘civilisation’ we could not help but wonder who the lucky ones were…

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