

The Night Watcher

Posted on



The night watchman up in his pela

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We follow the bobbing light of the lamp ahead of us. The narrow trek cut through the shrubbery is aligned with an electrical wire. After a few minutes we arrive at a clearing where a rickety fence surrounds the cultivated premises. The entrance, a small opening to wriggle through, is marked by a large skull of a cow hoisted on a stick, traditionally believed to ward off undesirable vibes. The area here too is bordered by another electrical wire rising above the average height.

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At the centre of the clearing stood the ground dwellings; a wattle and daub hut of clay and thatched-roof simplicity, had signs of being inhabited frequently. At its entrance too hung the skull of a cow; a clutter of pots and pans, a hearth, a blackened kettle and a mat for sleeping comprised the bare necessities. Wimalay placed the lamp indoors and promptly set about his night's routine, to begin one of the oldest of many traditions in farming culture – *pel rekeema* or guarding in huts.

When the seeds sown in the ploughed fields begin to sprout, much of the fields' crops are threatened by wild animals in remote parts, in this instance, the Gonnoruwa village in Hambantota. More often than not the trespassers leave damaged crops and fields in their wake. As a result farmers have long been known to guard their crops throughout the night and scare off any nocturnal intruders. This however would be carried out at a watch hut or *pela*. An *attalaya pela* is built in a tree to afford a bird's eye view of the area and spot approaching animals from a safe distance. In this season, it is not uncommon to catch glimpses of watch huts wedged firmly in tops of trees beside the fields. Built with branches, twigs and a thatched roof, the scaled down dimensions make for a snug hideout for the farmer.

While we got accustomed to our bearings, Wimalay rummaged about the outhouse. First he set his kettle on the hearth to boil water. Having had his dinner at home, a whip up of a quick snack or cup of tea is for any friends who make welcome visits in the night. It is only a bottle of water that he carries up to his *attalaya*. Before venturing up however, he emerged with the heated coconut shells and more wood, to set up a bonfire. It is believed that the kindling fire would keep away the animals to some extent. The most common threat however is the elephants. Having ignited a flame he spent several minutes hunched beside it urging the young flames with persistent puffing. He then busied himself to prepare a kerosene lamp to take up to the watch hut. This turned out to be a curiously improvised contraption, with a broken bottle half used as a lamp shade.

His *attalaya* was located right above the fields, atop a tall Kohomba tree about 20 feet off the ground. Preferably a hut is built on either Kohomba or Siyamabala trees as they provide cooler environs and possess greater metal to withstand external forces. Although it appeared a makeshift abode this particular *attalaya* had been in existence for five years. A rickety ladder rose up to its mouth and seemed to tease us with a challenge. Its cosy

confines did have the capacity to shelter up to three individuals at most. However we picked our preference cosied-up by the now flaming bonfire munching boiled and salted peanuts.

A watcher will give out a loud shout to alert the surrounding watchers who will rush to the location and build up a ruckus to chase away the animals.

With many of the fields adjacent to one another watchers are not entirely alone. They are all within earshot of one another. On occasion of wild animals entering the field, a watcher will give out a loud shout to alert the surrounding watchers who will rush to the location and build up a ruckus to chase away the animals. With everything readied Wimalay tied his kerosene lamp to an end of a rope dropped down from the watch hut and finally started his climb up. Within seconds he had nimbly made his way to the top and slowly hoisted his lamp before disappearing into the hut. Effortless on his part, an outsider would feel inclined to exercise caution and test each rung with the ascent.

Soon all was still in the quiet of the night and time was ripe to head our way back. The stars winked in an inky-black sky and the only sounds were the rustle of trees in the cool breeze and the crackling bonfire. Night after night Wimalay was privy to this singular blend of the solitary night as he lay in watchful wake till the first morning light. The flickering light of his kerosene lamp that now hung on a stump below the hut was the only sign of his presence.

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