



Mounds of sesame left to dry in the sun

Fields of cultivation, greenery of unsullied terrain, rivers, lakes and ancient ruins spanned the stretch along the Oyamaduwa Road. Coursing the distance, an enterprising way of life centred around farming unravelled in the season of sesame cultivation and the harvests here were plentiful.

Words Prasadini Nanayakkara **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Damith Wickramasinghe

Cruising along A9 in Medawachchiya we turned off to Mannar Road. Passing Neriyaikulam we arrive at a juncture leading to the much chronicled ancient Thantirimale Temple. While the immediate vicinity has gained renown along with the namesake of the sacred site, a snaking road that stretched beyond the limits of the seeing eye held an allure of its own. The Oyamaduwa road, we soon discovered, had much more to offer.

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Cultivation lands were the predominant sights, pleasantly interrupted by contained wilderness on either sides. From a distance we were unfamiliar with the crops cultivated and several had already harvested as evidenced by straw-like mounds that dotted the cleared fields. Curious, we approached a pair of farmers collecting the remainder of the strewn stalks. Salaudin, one of the farmers, rattled a fistful of dried harvest on to his palm, which unleashed a drizzle of black seeds. ‘Thala,’ he declared and as we encountered many such fields along the way, it was indeed the season for sesame cultivation.

Sesame takes three months to grow to maturity following the sowing of seeds and at the time of our visit many had only just harvested and left to dry in the sun. The freshly cut stalks are stacked upright in piles to sun dry for as long as 10 to 15 days and many fields we encountered were still at this stage, save one. Munasinghe and his wife were a step ahead sifting the threshed seeds through a large sieve to eliminate the grains of sand. Usually a kilo of sesame is offered a price of 150 rupees by buyers who visit the fields for collection.

The farmers revealed that fields in this region grow sesame organically without the use of any artificial fertilizers or chemicals. While dried sesame is sold, some process it further, soaking it in water for over 12 hours and then cleaning the black outer coating to leave the typical light coloured sesame seeds. The drought tolerant crop is ideally grown in the dry season and farmers prepare the fields for crops like Undu or Black Gram thereafter. These seeds then find their way to the market in its seed form or as sesame oil.

Along our winding path we happened upon a vital source of sustenance for all the cultivation around. Bubbling beneath a bridge ran the Malwathu Oya with aged trees lining its banks. It serves as an idyllic pit stop for commuters who make their way to the banks for rest, refreshment and a meal beside the cooling waters

Agriculture appeared to be the prevalent means of sustenance in the region and houses often accommodated more than one vehicle such as a threewheeler, tractor or bike, for both ease of commute and transport of goods. Some carried out the processing of sesame at their households, their garden spaces crowded with the typical mounds of sesame stalks. Many families in this region earn a living cultivating seasonal crops having migrated from Medawachchiya and never had we encountered an abundance of sesame fields elsewhere in the Island. However, paddy fields too added to the lush greenery with acres of vastness sown with young paddy. Of the two cultivating seasons, paddy is cultivated only during the Maha season as the region lacks irrigation that is needed during the Yala season.

Along our winding path we happened upon a vital source of sustenance for all the cultivation around. Bubbling beneath a bridge ran the Malwathu Oya with aged trees lining its banks. It serves as an idyllic pit stop for commuters who make their way to the banks for rest, refreshment and a meal beside the cooling waters. We too ventured down to the stream-side to indulge in a few lulling moments beside the meandering waters. Aside from the Malwathu Oya, are the Thanthirimale Oya and several other bodies of water that we happened upon along the way. Each commanded our notice and we were compelled to linger for a few moments at a time for some respite amidst the balmy environs. These spots also serve as places for villagers to engage in simple forms of fishing for a humble catch for the day.

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While Thantirimale is the most prominent ancient site in the region, there are several others that can be found along the way. We diverted off the main road to discover a forest hermitage, Bataranaga Lena Aranya a kilometre distance in. Its Chief Incumbent Ven Pagoda Janthawansa Thero obliged us with an intricate story of the ancient site that comprised mainly of rock cave dwellings and inscriptions. The site was first uncovered by Edward Muller in 1883, which was further extended by findings by H C B Bell and Prof Senerath Paranavitharana. Extensive excavations have uncovered a total of 11 stone inscriptions of which the last was excavated as recently as 2011. These inscriptions belong to various eras while the oldest date as far back as the Third Century BC. We gently tread across the premises engulfed in a pronounced serenity, to observe the many ancient remains from cave dwellings to inscriptions and more. Each inscription when deciphered reveals the devotee that made the offering of the cave dwelling at the forest hermitage. Other points of interest are ancient drawings on the remains of a stone wall, and a boundary wall dated over 1,800 years together with a staircase that descends below ground level indicating it may have led to a bathing area. It is believed that there still remains much to be uncovered across the acreage of the hermitage, in the years to come.

At the final stretch of our journey along the Oyamaduwa Road the scenic beauty embodied by lush lands, forests and lakes, prevailed while sites of historical importance awaited discovery. Reaching Oyamaduwa, it felt as though we had quietly perused through the leaves of a book that pieced together a story of ancient times, a people and a way of life, all along a snaking road.

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The road to Oyamaduwa Sesame season and Serenity