The Twinkling Lights of the Lagoon

Posted on



Casting the net is a skill passed down from father to son

As night approached we reached the Periya Muhaththuvaram bridge, Thambiluvil in Thirukkovil. The twinkling lights in the lagoon caught our attention, a closer look and we were excited to see prawn fishermen drawing their nets with a bountiful catch.

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It was completely dark except for the occasional vehicle travelling on the road and the lights of the fishermen engaged in their task in the waters of the lagoon. We ventured down the slope one behind the other, and proceeded towards the lagoon with only the lights of our phones to guide us. It was great fun as we humoured each other about the creatures of the night.



Prawn fishing at night is a livelihood that has been passed down generations

As we reached the edge of the water, it was a hive of activity. In prawn fishing, the fishermen allocate a specific area for each person and generally that spot belongs to them for generations. The area that they have selected for themselves will be their designated spot and it cannot be taken by anyone else. At times the place is demarcated with a small ‘kotuwa’, a square made of wooden sticks. There are fishermen who have been engaged in this trade for over three decades. And, the skill is passed down from father to son. Lights, almost positioned in a straight line

from the lagoon to land, signified the position of each fisherman. The prawn season had just begun, and preparing one's area had been done about a week before, where they cast the net on a regular basis to clear the debris at the bottom and smoothen the lagoon floor for the prawns. The fishermen arrive daily in the evening and for hours till late night they cast their nets. Once full they draw it back to their station where the prawns are transferred into a previously dug shallow circular trough. This action is repeated throughout the night until the fisherman feel that they have collected a sufficient catch. Generally this form of collecting prawns is known as prawn fishing as it depends on their natural behaviour, whereas prawn farming and harvesting refers to the commercial production of prawns.



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The behavior of the prawns is unpredictable, as the fishermen say there are times when a large surge of prawns, flow through the lagoon and if one fisherman gathers a good catch in a single net then all the others too would begin to collect a large quantity as well. There are times when the quantities caught are less as well. The size of the prawns caught on each day varies too. The reason as to why various types of lamps are used is that the prawns are drawn to the light and on full moon days the fishermen catch a good harvest of prawns. On rainy days the catch is

much less as a large volume of water flows from the lagoon to the sea.

As the night progressed we decided to cross the water and venture towards the fishermen further away. Quietly and slowly, yet again in single file we walked through the lagoon waters to get a closer look to see whether there was any difference in sequence. It was the same as for those who had stationed themselves closer to the bridge. Yet, it was surprising to see that the fishermen had placed their motor bicycle and fishing gear on a small strip of land amidst the waters of lagoon. We could only assume that they had crossed the waters the same way we had. After observing the prawn fishermen for a while, we ventured back to the top of the bridge and on the other side, closer to the ocean there were prawn fishermen too.



Various types of lamps are used to attract prawns

The movements were almost rhythmic as the fishermen cast the nets and then after a few minutes drew them in, to yet again repeat the process. It was quite late when we decided to return to Arugambay, but as we headed back we could see the prawn fishermen of Thambiluvil, Thirukkovil continuing their tasks as the glittering lights

sparkled brightly in the dark lagoon.