

Toddy Life

Posted on



Wooden barrels used for the collection of toddy can be seen by the roadside

He places his foot on the rope, it sags under his weight but holds; the knot is strong. His bare feet inch their way forward, his hands reach up and hold onto the rope above. On these two fragile supports his life now depends. Below, far below are the jagged rocks. There are no safety nets. No nets to catch him. No one below notices him. He is only a small figure far above; only the ordinary toddy tapper doing his every day job.

Words Chiranthi Rajapakse Photographs Prabath Chathuranga and Indika de Silva

Toddy is an alcoholic drink made by fermenting the sap of the coconut flower. The toddy tapper's task is to climb the coconut tree and obtain the sap from the coconut flower. As you drive down the road from Colombo towards the South the signs of the toddy tapper become apparent. Their presence is signalled by the ropes that can be seen tied between the tops of

the coconut trees. The tappers use these ropes to move from tree to tree. ¶In this way they can tap toddy from a large number of trees without having to climb down to the ground.

On the morning that we meet him, Bombalage Don Sunil is already hard at work. A toddy tapper for the past 15 years, this slightly built, wiry man spends his life swarming up coconut trees. Before tapping the toddy, he says, the flower must first be ‘beaten’ (thalanawa) for three days. After that the flower is cut allowing the sap to drain out. To collect the sap, he climbs the tree and ties a container (labu katey). This is done in the evening, the container is left overnight and the contents are collected early next morning.

Strapped around Sunil’s waist are the tools of his trade. The most important is the ‘labu katey’, a round container which is used to collect the toddy. A small wooden box holds his implements. Most important among these are the ‘thalanaya’, a wooden stick resembling a rounded hammer with which he pounds the flower, ¶and a knife which is used to cut the coconut flower. The box holding his tools and the ‘labu katey’ are secured to his waist by a broad band tied around his sarong, thus leaving his hands free to climb. Also hanging from his waist is a coil of rope. ¶With this simple equipment he’s ready to start on his hazardous job.

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Sunil’s working day starts at five every morning and he taps around 50 trees every day, covering an area of more than a mile. Each tapper works on a certain number of trees, he says. The trees do not belong to him, and he works on contract to tap toddy. The unfermented toddy is collected and sent to the distillery and he is paid according to the amount collected.

He learnt to climb on his own. “Baya nee” (not afraid) he says when we ask him whether he’s not nervous about climbing, his skill lies in his hands. His only aid is a makeshift ‘ladder’ made by tying coconut husks to the coconut tree trunk, these provide a foothold which he uses to climb.

As we watch him work, another ‘labu katey’ appears in sight, ¶suspended at the end of a rope hanging from a tall coconut tree. ¶Two men are working together; the tapper high up in the tree slowly lowers the container, which is caught by his colleague on the ground. ¶He carefully pours the contents into a wooden pail, the frothy white coloured liquid swirls around the pail. The tapper pulls up the rope and the now empty container is sent up again. The tapper then moves along the ropes to the next tree, ¶an efficient system that allows him

to move from tree to tree.

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Another sight that can be seen along the southern route are wooden barrels placed by the side of the road, these are used to collect the toddy. Plastic containers are now replacing the wooden barrels in many areas, but some still remain.

The Toddy Tapper’s Tools;

The ‘thalanaya’, used to pound the coconut flower, a knife, a coil of rope, the ‘labu katey’ and a box to hold the tools which can be strapped to the tapper’s waist

The toddy tapper’s tale is a strange one; everyone has heard of toddy, in fact it’s sometimes claimed to be Sri Lanka’s most popular drink. But the unusual process that goes into producing it is often overlooked. So the next time you drive down the road to the South, look up. □ Sometimes, if you are lucky, you may see the toddy tappers silhouetted above; stop a moment and watch them, those tightrope walkers between the trees.

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