To Vakarai

Posted on



Two fishermen carrying a fresh catch of fish to the karavala vadiya

It was but just another day as we sped along the Maradankadawala-Habarana-Thirukkondaiadimadu Highway heading towards Vakarai. The relentless glare of the sun was our constant companion on a well paved road lined with greenery that were fast turning a shade of brown amidst the onslaught of the sun…

Words Krishani Peiris **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda

The road loomed ahead of us, winding its way to the far distance. The landscape devoid of anything but vegetation that at point held a secluded charm was loosing its appeal fast as we waited for a change. All of a sudden in the distance on the road that wove through like a grey ribbon, two moving objects caught our attention. As we drew near we realized that the two objects were indeed two people on

bicycles ladened with firewood. Teetering from side to side, the two riders peddled hard with their precious cargo that were stacked in a pile, which towered over their heads.

Turning to the A15 Highway, we continued our journey passing Mankerni and countless other small villages that were sparsely populated, greeted every now and then by riders on bicycles, vehicles, houses, small wayward shops and the occasional bus that whizzed pass. To our right the ocean glittered brilliantly, hidden behind the numerous fields, affording only brief glimpses occasionally. However, intrigued by these sparing glances, we found a small path that led right to the shore. The beauty that unfolded before us was so breathtaking that we stood transfixed for a long time letting our eyes linger over the aquamarine breadth of the ocean and the white sandy shores that stretched as far as the eye could see. Here and there fishing boats lay strewn—a tell tale sign of the main breadwinner of many families in the area.

Soon we were back on the road reaching the Panichchankerni Bridge and Causeway in what seemed like a matter of minutes. The bridge lay over the Upaar Lagoon and before its construction and opening in September 2013, people had to take a ferry to reach the other side. Standing and leaning over the railing or sitting and huddled against two balusters of the bridge were more than dozen individuals with fishing rods. Each patiently waited till a small tug at the end of the rod strove one to animatedly haul in their catch. Shrimp traps littered the lagoon below while a few fishing boats made their rounds checking to see if the traps set before have lured in the crustaceans.

Continuing on our voyage, we were yet again enticed to stop along the A15 as a curious sight of a group of people crowded around a tree conducting what seemed to be a pooja captured our attention. The adults busied about while the young ones remained seated chatting gaily. Reaching the site, we inquired whether we could observe the pooja and received a positive reply. However, we were instructed to wash our feet before entering the sanctified space. At the base of the tree, the side facing away from the road, a special podium had been prepared where flowers, a coconut, bananas, pineapples and countless other items were arranged. Covered on two sides, the devotees were deftly shredding coconut leaves to provide a front covering for the sacred podium and to swathe around the tree while yet others were wrapped around another tree situated to the side. The poosari and some others busied about as such, another man was preparing a pot of coconut milk. As we watched, the man mixed water to the grated coconut, extracting the coconut milk

which he then poured into a clay pot decorated with flowers.

The pooja, called Naga Panchami, is said to be conducted every year by families seeking blessings for a bountiful harvest in the region. The Naga Panchami or Naga Pooja is an ancient and traditional form of cobra worship and many believe that the tree where the pooja is held had been a sacred space for more than 200 years. The pot of coconut milk was soon placed in a roaring fire to boil over, after which the family said that they would leave some milk in the hollow of the tree situated next to the sacred one in the hopes that the cobra would come and drink the milk completing the ritual and ensuring prosperity for the family.

> The Naga Panchami, is said to be conducted every year by families seeking blessings for a bountiful harvest in the region

Taking our leave, we finally arrived at Vakarai. A small, sleepy town with a few scattered buildings. Our inquisitive feet however, carried us inwards to some of the small communities living in Vakarai. Small thatched houses with large gardens were the characteristic features of the villages and there were hardly anyone on the road. All seemed to be staying inside heir small houses, undoubtably enjoying the cool shade within as every now and then we heard giggles and shouts of little ones drifting from inside. Taking a path that was labelled the ‘Sea Road’ we wended our way in a road fringed with coconut estates from where we could see the ocean that just lay beyond. Unable to find a footpath let alone a road that led to the beach, we cut across a field emerging a few steps away from a group of fishermen busy sifting through a fresh catch.

Each quickly separated the fish to two groups—one to be sold to vendors who have gathered at the beach and one to be prepared as karavala or dried fish. Two fishermen who had a cane basket ladened with fish quickly carried it to the waters to soak and wash the fish before carrying it off to a thatched structure located a couple of metres away. Another fisherman informed us that the fish were carried off to the karavala wadiya, a small thatched structure with a garden where the fish will be turned to dried fish, a process that takes three to four days.

Some fishermen were busy preparing a madela or a large fishing net that was spread on the beach. A little ways off another group of fishermen were tirelessly hauling a fishing net. Each was securely anchored to a rope and bit by bit, each

keeping pace with one another moved backwards. The gathering length of the rope at the end attested to the amount of work that they have done. We were told that they have hauled in the net for one hour already and two more hours remained to haul in the fresh catch. Each swayed backwards to a tune that only they could hear, a sound perhaps brought in by the gently rippling waves of the ocean.

Wiser to a way of life that is very different from our own, we left Vakarai having experienced countless sights that made us privy to the charm of the numerous villages and towns of the eastern coast of the isle.

