

Village Vignettes

Posted on

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I can see it to this day, that radiant panorama that wilderness of rich color that incomparable dissolving view of harmonious tints, and lithe half-covered forms, and beautiful brown faces and gracious and graceful gestures and attitudes and movements, free, unstudied, barren of stiffness and restraint..." (Mark Twain: Following the Equator: A Journey Round the World").

The creator of Tom Sawyer' and 'Huckleberry Finn' was visiting Sri Lanka in 1896- and he was charmed, even astonished at the most sumptuously tropical view" unfolded before him in this island. Not only views, but the people and their lifeways enthralled him, so simple and yet so distinctive; so natural, nothing really put up or on for his or anybody's benefit but as immemorally carried on and inhered in to create patterns that have endured.

What strikes any sensitive traveller passing through the rural countryside is the strange somnolence that pervades. The trees reaching to the canopy of sky; the

wind racing through the paddy-fields, the grass fields, the vegetable plots, the mixed gardens, the open spaces; but, except in the small bazaars, the tiny townships, the bustling weekday fairs and polas and elsewhere, there is little occasion to see a human being. And yet everywhere the village is peopled. Everywhere some activity is going on though seemingly not overtly.

Here women are sweeping their mud and wattle houses or the new ones they've built on firmer foundations with cement floors and bricks and tiles to replace the so easily perishable mud huts. Here and there the women are busy cooking the mid-day meal clay over wood fires built in the compounds at the rear in clay "chatty" pots shaped as pots were millennia ago. Rice with vegetable curries. Some fish, fried-fish from the river running hard-by. Or it could be dried fish with a pol coconut sambol: the universal favourite. Enough is cooked to last for the night meal too. And in the clay chatty pots cooked over wood fires the food remains wholesome for several hours.

Deep in the jungle groves at the edge of the village other women will be splitting and gathering fallen branches from the trees. Collecting firewood has always been the women's task. A bevy of them set out at mid-day after the cooking for the day is done, to bring home a few days quota of wood. Fallen coconut branches are eagerly collected as are the hanasu matalu, the dried spathes of the coconut flower. An hour or two later you could see them walking back, the huge bundles of twigs and branches tied with a length of stout liana, chatting amicably together as they come with their heavy loads. One recalls how an Englishman quartered in Kandy three centuries ago made some sardonic comments on women gathering wood.

To fetch wood out of the Woods to burn, and to fetch home the Cattle is the Woman's Work. If they cannot have their opportunities (to meet their paramours) at home, now they appoint their meetings, while the husband stays at home holding the Child..." (Robert Knox: An Historical Relation of Ceylon).

In season, after the sowing, when the paddy shoots have to be transplanted you will find the women again out in the muddy fields ankle-deep their colorful cloths hitched up to their knees, engaged in this back-breaking task. They might sing together melodiously or chant some prayer stanza while they toil but cheerfully. The men assist from the background, but the task of transplanting those tiny jade green shoots is always the village women's - as it has been for countless centuries.

In the harvest season the men and women work together. The village is all a-bustle.

Both men and women are adept at reaping and you can see them rhythmically manufactured so expertly by those the sharp, village smith. It is a time of boisterous activity-the taking in of the harvest. Tea-hot and strong - has to be served frequently to the reapers. Food has to be cooked for them. The betel chew or cigarettes provided. The sheaves gathered and transported by cart or tractor to the threshing floor. Various rites and rituals dating back to the ancient times of the old gods and demons are enacted. And the work, the mutual and sharing effort, has to be completed while the sun shines hot and bright yet in a cloudless sky. It would not do for the golden grain to be washed by the rains.



A village woman spreads her grain on a mat in the open air. (Suresh de Silva)



Villagers planting paddy in a field.

There are spots along the rural roads where you would hear the tinkling sounds of laughter and the buzz-buzz of light-hearted chatter as you pass, and maybe stop for a while to take in the charming scene. Wherever a rivulet flows like crystal over a shamble of black stones, where a stream goes gurgling by tributary of a great river- or where a river shallows itself, you will see them. “Whole families bathing together, the children entirely naked, the parents managing somehow in their clothes, which, after all, are not so numerous as to prove much of an encumbrance ... ” (Frances Parkinson Keyes: 1926). Scores of visitors have been entranced by the sight of the communal river-baths the villagers of Sri Lanka take every day. Or in the up-country under a natural spout, a “peella” as it is called or even beneath the sparkle of a gentle waterfall.

For the villager this is a must. The women are clad in diya-reddes, folds of cloth worn from above the breasts but sleekly yet casually see through while the men don loin cloths. This communal, mixed bathing is simply taken for granted by the village folk and here they will also meet exchange news and views, the latest gossip about the great and the famous (and even the powerful), wash their clothes and sun them out to dry on the rocks while they scrub and soak and dive into or stand relaxed under or in the flowing waters. It certainly makes their day.

“Children, beautiful dark-eyed children ... They are simply the most lovely children ever seen, with great dreamy eyes and bright expressive faces. They are a great deal prettier and more graceful than our village children ... ” Like (Mary Thom Carpenter: “A Girl’s Winter in India”: 1890). Like Mary Thom Carpenter, scores of

visitors have been enchanted with the “Child of Sri Lanka”. They are best visible in the villages off the beaten track, if not as “swarmingly” as in the more touristic ones, though the girls would be far more timid to come out upon the road even to play than the boys. It is the boys, the boys of all ages, who play together on the road or on the common, or get together, on the road or on the common, or get together in cliques to while their time away; it is easier for girl rather than boys to obtain work these days in or near the village.

As the evening wanes into night the sound of drums can be heard. Somewhere, not too far, often in a village homestead itself, the ceremonies are being enacted to drive away the malefic effects of the “evil eye.. upon a family, to ward off sickness or to cure what seems incurable to modern medical aid, to ensure luck and blessings upon people beset with innumerable troubles.

The “Thovil” or “Bali” ceremony with the “Kattadiya” (or Master of Ceremonies) in charge has begun. There on palm leaf altars with a crude clay image of the deity or the demon moulded and set up for all to see, offerings of flowers and fruit and young coconuts smothering it, the people gathered around in the make-shift shed built for the ritual, the age-old rites begin: practices and services dedicated to the folk deities thousands of years old and remaining at the grassroots level of the culture in the village of Sri Lanka to this day. The “Kattadiya” himself is a powerful figure, with the esoteric powers to control the evil forces, to drive out malevolent demons, to cure the neuroses, even the psychoses, that breed the diseases of the body. Or so he and the village believe. And the people have confidence in him. The whoops of the “devil dancer”, the cries of his petitioning, the sounds of the drums go on deeper and deeper into the night only to cease with the dawning of another day.

