Wanderers that Fascinate

Posted on



Podimahattaya charms with his flute tunes

The sharp screech of mischievous monkeys swinging off trees held our attention as we walked towards the entourage of travelling gypsies. The chattering that reached our ears indicated the wanderers were waking and getting ready for their day.

Words Keshini de Silva | **Photographs** Menaka Aravinda and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Michael leads the way; Wanalatha (L), Podimahattaya Arachchila and his wife Rahai

In quiet Mirigama, as the Coastal Railway Line met with the sleek tarmac, amidst pale concrete structures and foliage, our eyes caught a rare glimpse of a temporary gypsy settlement. We scrambled off the road onto the settlement, and were greeted by the leader or *'Arachchila'* of the gypsies themselves, Podimahattaya. A grin on his face, he sat on a log in front of his tent to answer our queries.

Gypsies have been in Sri Lanka for at least four generations, he says. With ancestry hailing from the state of Telangana in India, their main dialect is Telugu, although today their children study and speak in Sinhalese. In the times of his father, their people would wander from village to village with their worldly possessions laden on the backs of donkeys. They would stay for no more than a week, as food needed to be sourced for their donkeys.

The Sinhalese name for gypsies *'Ahi Guntika'* is a derivation from Pali, where *'Ahi'* means snake and *'Guntika'* means fascinator. It hints at the traditional professions of the gypsy community, which are snake charming, performances by monkeys and fortune telling. While on the move, the gypsies would enthrall villagers. Stopping mid-sentence, Podimahattaya then beckoned his brother-in-law Raja in Telugu. Raja later emerged with three tightly bound cane baskets.

Twiddling a flute, a contraption made from *Thiththa Labu* (Desert Gourd), Podimahattaya sat on the floor. As the flute melody pierced the air, two cobras lifted their heads from the baskets, male and female, they bobbed their heads to the tune and writhed about their creel. When the lid came off the 3rd basket, the atmosphere vibrated with a loud throbbing hissing noise that made the wholesome *Kola Kandha* (green porridge) we had consumed earlier dance in my stomach. Soon, a glossy *Thith Polonga* or Russell's Viper slithered into view. Though smaller in size, the sound of the venomous reptile was most beguiling.

Podimahattaya next called up his friendly pet monkey Michael. Apart from somersaulting through hoops, the talented and nimble Michael can mimic various actions, such as how farmers walk with a *udalla* (hoe) on their shoulders or how the gypsies carry sacks on their backs as they travel on foot. Once completing his charade, Michael somersaulted, gave a high five and retreated to his companion in the trees. We even had our fortunes told by the feisty Wanalatha, who was well-informed of our future by the mere lines on our palms.

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The gypsies are also quite versed in indigenous medicine and herbs. Their ancestors originally being hunters, discovered various herbal plants during their forays into the forests. This knowledge is passed down their generations. From his Medicine

Pouch, Raja showed us a *Sudu Ela Wara* (Swallowwort) root imbued with medicinal properties, they believe having a piece of this root in your wallet will protect you from any venomous animal, even if you step on it. Having a root dusted in turmeric and tied with a white cloth in your home, the gypsies say, ensures serpents will not enter your garden. The result of their medicinal crafts include a *'Beheth Gala'*, a tiny stone that will absorb poison from the body once placed on the area of the bite. The stone can be used for many years, provided that once used, it is soaked in milk and then cleaned well. If it is fortune and success you seek, a *Nari Anga* or a coil of fur found on the top of a fox's head should do the trick, the gypsies believe.



The snake charmer's flute is made of Thiththa Labu

Tracing his legacy Podimahattaya speaks about his *Loku Thaththa* or uncle, who was also a Arachchila. Muththusami Arachchila was in fact quite famous after being cast as a gypsy in the 1981 film Sathweni Dawasa (Seventh Day). While the film highlights how the gypsy community at the time was strict in maintaining limited ties with village folk, today their views and way of life are quite different.

The seven clans over which Podimahattaya Arachchila presides now, live in formal villages that were established for them during the early 1980s, spanning over Vavuniya, Kala Wewa, Batticaloa, Anuradhapura and Puttalam. He himself lives in the gypsy village called Kudagama in Anuradhapura. Leaving behind archaic beliefs of worshipping nature, the gypsies now follow either Buddhism or Christianity. Their communities inter-mingle with the Sinhalese and Tamils communities too.

Today, many in his village have also moved away from the nomad lifestyle for professions such as rice farming and the apparel industry. The few that continue in snake charming and fortune telling leave their homes and travel across the Island to showcase these arts and make a living. It is then that they set up tents, using durable thick polythene unlike the palm leaves used by their ancestors. Once every month, the wanderers must return to the Kudagama village to attend the '*Maranadara* meeting'. Here the aspects of their lives and leadership are discussed and voted on.

While many of the old gypsy traditions are no longer practiced, Podimahattaya smiles as he says that their generation will continue to wander throughout the Island hoping to fascinate many with their entertaining acts and skills.



