

Sellam Vannia on Nuwaragala rock summit

RE-CAPTURING THE OLD ROMANCE OF NUWARAGALA

RUSSEL KURUPPU

Looking like something evil, Nuwaragala dominated the jungle for miles around. Evidence that civilized man had once homed on that height was plentiful.

There was a cistern of limpid water hewn out of the living rock, open to the sky; a great cave on its very brow, overlooking a vast drop, with a weathered Sanskrit epigraph that told of 'Mahatissa' beloved of the gods' and hewn drip ledges below that..... it was a place of old romance and mystery (Spittel - 'Vanished Trails' - p. 34)

"There is evidence to prove that the Nuwaragala area (which is the classic stronghold of the Veddas during the 19th century) had been inhabited by a very intelligent people in centuries past." (Brohier Ancient Irrigation Works III - p. 42).

In his book 'Savage Sanctuary' R. L. Spittel recounts one of his numerous visits to Nuwaragala. So with only Kaira and Handuna as guides, the party proceeded towards Nuwaragala seven miles away, on the summit of which I meant to spend the night.

On the morning of 25th February 1980, I set out from Pollebedda on a similar mission, accompanied by three worthy descendants of that original duo-Heen Kaira, Gomba and Sellan Wanniya. Gomba and Heen Kaira were now my firm friends - by prior arrangement. Sellan Wanniya, I had met for the first time only that morning at the Pollebedda boutique.

I was happy that I had invited him to join us, because in the event he proved the most reliable. Likeable and

resourceful companion. Of course his father, Poromolo Saka and I were old friends.

Not merely satisfied with repeated visits to Pollebedda, I had for long wanted to hit the trails with the veddas. Each succeeding visit to Pollebedda served only to whet my appetite.

The Sitala Wanniya hills seemed always to beckon me, but then, what better than Nuwaragala to one so much acquainted with Spittel's works? Spittel met his first veddas in isolated jungle hamlets in the environs of Nuwaragala.

Decades later, Christine Wilson had accompanied her father to the 'peak of Nuwaragala crested with its mighty cave.

RESEARCHERS

Quite some time before Spittel, the Seligmanns, those researchers par excellence, described thus their meeting with the very primitive veddas around 1908-1909.

'We met with only four families who still led the life described by Bailey in 1863, and these were not among the Nilgala but among the Nuwaragala hills.'

These references help only to define a wider context. But to bring it nearer the lives of the Pollebedda Veddas, Nuwaragala is fondly remembered as a never failing source of jak, pine and bambara honey

It has a special place in their affection, unlike Gorakana, Daylbara, Sitala Wanniya or Raula-hela in the vicinity

GEOGRAPHY

From Pollebedda village to the summit of Nuwaragala is eight miles. For the first one and half miles the route lies across flat country, and could be said to terminate at Muthakada-galge, just beyond the Rambukkana Oya.

The next two and half miles lies through shady teak country and brings one to an open rock plain directly facing Nuwaragala. Traversing another mile, passing the Amparai road turn off, one reaches the base of the forest clad Nuwaragala.

The last three miles makes up the ascent to the top. From here onwards the ancient road trace and extent of the way is easily followed. Here it is appropriate to note what R. Lewis has to say in his most absorbing

description concerning Nuwaragala.

The path now becomes entirely built of large close-set masses of rough broken stone, but so perfectly have the stones been laid, both as regards gradient and position, that one could ride a horse along the path if the branches of overhanging trees were only removed.

Certain parts of the steeply winding ascent would daunt even the stoutest and sturdiest. We had to contend with the massive trunks of trees uprooted by the cyclone, which greatly hindered our progress. On occasions we had to advance by walking on the bole itself - and this was particularly hazardous.

To my shame, the idea of turning back came to me twice. Gomba, with gun in hand formed the advance guard, while Sellan Wanniya brought up the rear. I stuck close to the sure footed Heen Kaira, whose steadying hand made the ascent much less difficult for me.

Passing the Rambukkan Oya signified the entry into the unknown. I remember that this served as the take off point to many an adventure Spittel shared with the veddas, just beyond the crossing is Muthakadagalae, almost astride the very trail to Nuwaragala.

FIRST VIEW

It was my first view of an original vedda cave dwelling, though presently much despoiled by hippies, on the way up drinking water was always taken off clear and fast flowing streams.

There never appeared to be the need for diluting same with arrack or anything else. The veddas used this water both for brewing tea and cooking. To be sure the three veddahs were great tea drinkers.

At all these halts I closely observed the Veddas setting about these tasks, and was more than reassured to note that they were as hygienic as could possibly be in the circumstances full marks to them on that score - particularly to Sellan Wanniya. The hastily improvised coconut scraper won our admiration. Wonderfully effective and what a lesson in 'appropriate technology' I thought.

We reached the summit around 3.45 p.m. With allowances for the numerous halts, we had walked or climbed for about 4 hours 45 minutes, though it seemed so much longer. The sight of the rock pool brought to mind the near fatal accident concerning Professor Leigh Semith recounted by Christine Wilson in *Surgeon of the Wilderness* (48-50): We were careful to have a fair rest

before taking a dip.

The three veddas also followed suit - but obviously they were not adept swimmers. Brohier mentions that the term 'Kema' is more correctly applied to this rock pool, and also more consonant with local usage.

Heen Kaira and Gomba, set out on a hunt of sorts, intent mostly on bagging a grey langur or 'wanderoo' monkey. I was determined that there should be no killing of any sort-whether for food or in self-protection. The spoils were nil, and it was a foregone conclusion to me, who had secretly taken the necessary precautions.

The determined duo assayed out again, very early the next morning, but with much the same result. I was never happier, though not so much because of their obvious discomfiture.

Sellan Wanniya meanwhile, busied himself in collecting piles of dried wud from the surrounding jungle. These came in very useful at night, for not wishing to risk the cave, we slept on the rock under a canopy of starlit and cloudless sky.

RELAXING

The night meal over preparations were set afoot for sleep. It was very much the need of my companions, but did not urgently interest either the veddas or myself. We were on the rocky platform over looking the 'Kema'.

Sellan Wanniya made up two very bright wood fires, on either side. Though, the chill at night and the heavy dew towards morning did make it a trifle uncomfortable. For the four of us who kept awake till nearly 2a.m. there was much serious conversation and idle chatter, interspersed with regular bouts of tea drinking. I did my utmost to dissuade Gomba from guiding the hippies here-because I had seen and heard sufficient of their escapades on the summit.

The earlier part of these conversations was cassette

recorded. The veddas spoke of the many problems confronting the in Pollebedda. Though resigned to their eventual fate they now opine that the move to Pollebedda, or rather what came after it was a let down.

After Spittel no one cares for them, That is the burden of their complaint.

TISSAHAMY

Heen Kaira described a fateful meeting with 'minimaru' Tissahamy. Heen Kaira was a little one at the time, and his open eyed and awe inspired demeanour at the telling of this tale was effectively evocative of the original scene. And then there was a story concerning the gentle Sellan Wanniya that shook me greatly.

I learnt from Gomba and Heen Kaira that very recently Sellan Wanniya had unleashed a murderous assault on Gombira, for which the police had taken him severely to task. There was the very contrite Sellan Wanniya before me and I could hardly believe my ears Gombira is the younger brother of Heen Kaira.

Thus passed the longer hours of the night What little sleep we had thereafter was good, and I for one did not greatly feel the need for it. Very soon we were to turn to the varied aspects of the rising sun, which made an unforgettable vista of the mist filled gorge separating Nuwaragala from Ethbeddegala

A breakfast of sorts and then preparations for the descent and return to Pollebedda. For me, this had been the experience of a lifetime.

However, on learning that this would entail another foray into the deeper jungle around Sitala Wanniya, it had to be put off for a separate visit. At this point we parted-firmer friends than before. Heen Kaira and Sellan Wanniya to Galwalayaya; Gomba to Pollebedda and our party to Maha Oya and Serankada-until we return to hit the vedda trails again

World Council of Indigenous People

"The term 'indigenous peoples'... describes social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process."

—World Bank Operational Directive 4.20 (1991)



At the Environmental Seminar a Vedda Chief expresses his views. Expert media personnel Mr Sunil Sarath Perera translated his speech

Vedda chief Tissahamy participated in the live radio broadcast organized by the Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs with the sponsorship of the Sri Lanka Broadcasting Corporation to mark the International Year of the Indigenous People



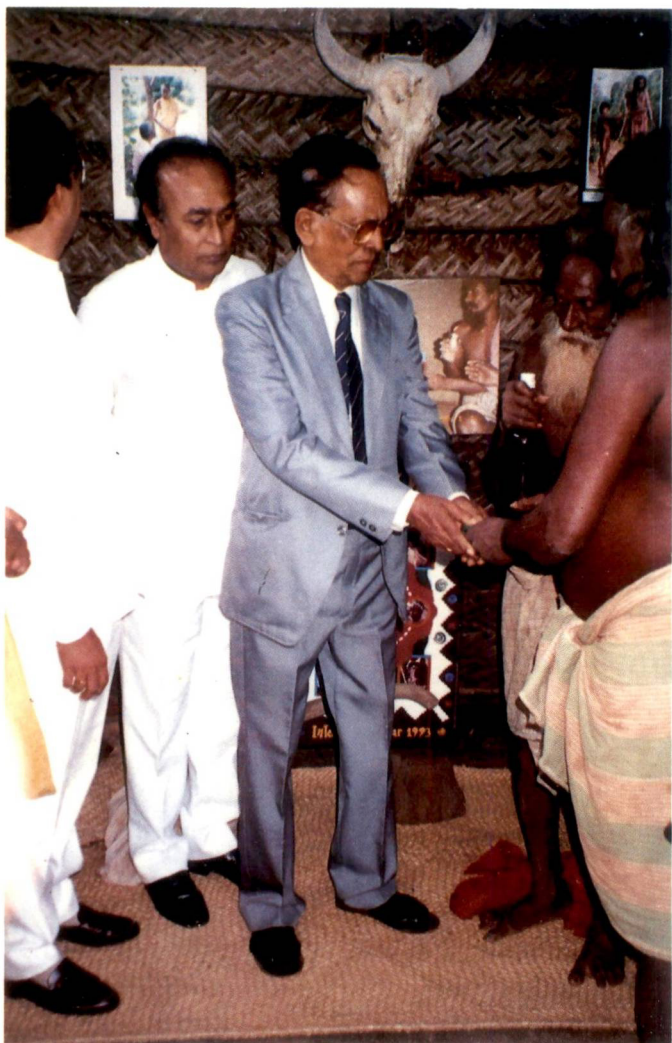
The Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs conducted a seminar with the participation of the Vedda community. Ministry Secretary, Dr D. Nesiiah, Environment Secretary Mr V. K. Nanayakkara, and Vedda representative Mr Sudu Badiya were the Chief Guests



When Dambane Gunawardena met the Minister of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs, Dr. Wimal Wickremasinghe, to discuss their problems.



At the Earth Summit held at Quezon City in Philippines recently, Dambane Gunawardena (in national dress) represented the Sri Lankan Vedda community as a member of the World Youth Corps. Mr. Sunil Sarath Perera acted as his manager.



At the "Parisara Sirisara" — Environ Lanka '92, exhibition the late Mr. Vincent Perera, Minister of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs chatting with the Veda representatives. Deputy Speaker Mr. Gamini Fonseka too joined in



To mark the International Year of the Indigenous People 1993, the Ministry of Environment and Parliamentary Affairs conducted a live Rupavahini programme sponsored by the Rupavahini Corporation. Prof. Nandadasa Kodagoda, Prof. K.N.O. Dharmadasa and Prof. P.B. Meegahakumbura featured in the programme which was diffused worldwide through satellite.

