

THE STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL OF AN ABORIGINAL GROUP : THE VEDDAS OF SRI LANKA

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Hennanigala Vedda Chief Kaluappu strives to maintain their traditional culture in the new settlements

The Veddas have existed for thousands of years as a group with a distinctive ethnic identity. According to Brow (1978 : 5), the Veddas are one of the most famous and one of the least known people in the literature of SOBA / September 1993

anthropology. The Seligmanns (1911) described them as 'one of the most primitive of existing races... numerically small and verging on extinction'. For this reason, Vedda identity today is a matter of self declaration

(Brow 1978:27). Dharmadasa and Samarasinghe (1990) have pinpointed some of the criteria such as isolated settlement, hunting and gathering as a mode of living, language, religion, customs and social organisation that characterise the Vedda community in Sri Lanka.

At the time of the Seligmanns, VeSddas were of forest, village or coastal types according to their habitat. Most of the forest Veddas have adapted subsequently to settled life in villages. They lived in small groups and organised as clans or 'waruge'. The forest ecology significantly influenced their lives, and there existed a balance between their wants and the rewards of nature. Even after their adaptation to village life, they preferred nomadism to settled agriculture.

VEDDA POPULATION

Historical records as well as population censuses reveal the numbers and whereabouts of Veddas since the late nineteenth century. At the second population census of Sri Lanka in 1881, 2,228 Veddas were enumerated. In 1911, the figure was 5,332, while in subsequent censuses, a rapid decrease of numbers was recorded. Since the 1963 census, the Veddas have not been counted as a separate ethnic group but it was estimated that about 2,000 lived in Sri Lanka in 1985 (Hyndman 1987 : 219).

The changing geographical distribution of Vedda settlement not only reflects the numerical decline of the community but also its retreat to the marginal jungle areas. The place-names given in various sources indicate that about 120 places have been used as their habitat. Bintenna, which has been a major Vedda country for centuries, and has been referred to as "Maha Vedi Rata", consists of the triangular lowland area in the dry zone of Sri Lanka east of the central highland and is cut off from the North Central province by the river Mahaweli. Veddas could secure their livelihood in this area because its environmental conditions are appropriate for a hunting and gathering life. Its soil and climate are not suitable for paddy cultivation.

A Shrinking Habitat and Changing Life Style

The jungles of the dry zone which provided freedom for hunting gathering and shifting cultivation have declined in area during the last half century. Especially after Sri Lankan independence most of the dry zone forest areas were opened for settlement and irrigation schemes. Nationally, the paddy land area increased by 35 percent between 1946 and 1982. In Eastern and Uva provinces this increase was rapid, further threatening the isolated life of the Vedda community. The forest

cover of the island reduced from 44 percent in the 1950s to 24 percent in the 1980s in consequence. Today (1993) the figure stands at 20 percent.

Amongst the major development the Galoya Irrigation Scheme (1949-52) in the Eastern province made a significant impact on the Vedda community. The 'Senannayake Samudraya', the major reservoir built under the project, inundated or removed for catchment purposes some of the best hunting lands and caves of the Veddas, whilst resettlement efforts further undermined their traditional patterns of living. In addition, legal and illegal clearing of forest and land alienation schemes brought about drastic changes in their environment, especially during the 1960s. The Mahaweli Development Programme, which is the largest irrigation and settlement scheme today, covers most of the Veddas' habitat in the Bintenna, Thamankaduwa and Eastern provinces. Systems "C" and "B" of the project, envisaged to develop about 150,000 hectares, are already nearing completion. Nearly 35,000 families from various parts of the island have been settled in these areas.

The most immediate impact of this shrinking forest area on the Veddas has been their inability to continue traditional lifestyles. Veddas have adapted to village life by integrating with Sinhalaese and Tamils in the vicinity. Several instances are also reported of efforts to rehabilitate these people in resettlement project or through provision of basic amenities. These included alienation of lands, provision of better housing facilities, education and health services.

DAMBANA: A TRADITIONAL VEDDA SETTLEMENT

Dambana, one of the last of the traditional Vedda settlements, is located on a plain between two rivers, Maduru Oya and Mahaweli. The village is the prime Vedda settlement due to the presence of the present chief, Tissahami. This Vedda habitat is one of the last forest domains remaining after many development interventions in the area. The Seligmanns, who visited in 1909, reported that some twenty families lived in tolerably well built houses, keeping buffaloes and cultivating chena. They had limited barter trade with outsiders. Even then Dambana Veddas had been exposed to the outside world through local and foreign visitors. As positive outcome of this, they have preserved the Vedda language for the present generation.

According to our inquiries, Dambana today comprises several small clusters of families scattered in an area of



The future wardens of the new settlements with their elders

about 30 miles radius. The hamlets of Dambana, Kudawila, Wilegama, Mabudanwela, Deragoda, Indiatta, Weherapoluna, Paradawila, Kakulapola, and Kokagala each had about 10-15 families in the recent past. According to Census reports, the Vedda population in the area varied through time. In 1946, 31 Veddas were in Dambana and another 14 in the nearby village of Beligalla. At the 1953 Census 46 persons were in Dambana and 74 in Bulugahadena. It was revealed in our discussions that each cluster of families had about 500 acres for hunting and gathering. They moved their temporary shelters from place to place since there was space to do so.

The present Dambana Gramasewaka Division, which is the smallest unit of administration, covers about 33 square miles and consists of nine hamlets, namely Galkanda, Bimmalamulla, Gurukumbura, Dambana, Kudawila, Nabudanwela, Keragoda, Weherapokuna and Wilegama. Some of these have already been abandoned due to evacuation and resettlement in the Mahaweli settlements. Thus the total population in the Gramasewaka division is declining. In 1989 there were 1,816 people and in 1991 the figure was 1,560.

Maduru Oya National Park is one of three nature reserves to be created under the Mahaweli Development Programme. It was declared in 1983 under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance, and covers about 58,850 hectares. The area of the national park encompasses a number of traditional settlements, including major habitats of the Vedda folk. According to a survey conducted in 1981, about 4,616 people, both Veddas and non-Veddas, lived in the area and the government intended evacuating them. Thus Vedda villages like Keragoda, Kotabakina, Koteyaa and Kandebanwila have been affected by the new project. The national park is intended to secure habitat for about 150-200 elephants displaced due to forest clearance for land development and settlement programmes of the Mahaweli scheme and to SOBA / September 1993

protect the catchment areas of Ulhiti Oya, Ratkinda Oya and Maduru Oya reservoirs. Therefore the hunting, gathering and chena cultivation practised by Dambana Veddas has been disturbed greatly by this intervention.

Considering the relative isolation, familiarity of environment and nearness to Veddas' ancestral lands the Mahaweli Authority planned to resettle evacuee Veddas from Maduru Oya National Park in Hennanigala in 1983. The need for these people to continue their cultural life in the future was considered and they were settled in one cluster. However, their lifestyle had to be changed as there was no provision for hunting. Each family was given one hectare of land and only irrigated paddy cultivation was possible. According to our observations, there were 131 Vedda families who had left their old habitat and had already started a new life there.

Some of the Veddas and most of the non-Vedda families who lived in the national park area accepted to shift their residence and start a new way of life. They were especially attracted to the new settlements because of availability of health and educational facilities and transport services which were lacking in the former villages. Siri Gamage (1984) highlighted that most of the villagers who accepted to shift had no more land for continuing chena cultivation and the damage to their crops by wild animals was frequent. The Kandeganwila school, located in the heart of traditional Vedda settlements, had been closed often, due to difficulties of appointing teachers and poor attendance. Thus the Vedda group led by Kalu Appu and Tapal Bandiya opted to move into new settlements.

However the evacuees from Dambana and its neighbourhood still complain about the lack of land for shifting cultivation. They have made requests to the authorities, but there is no provision to allocate land for this purpose. Their anxiety for chena cultivation was expressed to us by old Kaluppu, the traditional leader of the community.

While some of the Vedda households accepted to move into the Mahaweli settlements a group of families led by Tissahami, the traditional leader stressed the need for continuing the traditional lifestyle and remaining in Dambana.

According to news reports, on 6th April 1988 by order of the High court, the barriers in Dambana were removed and the case was fixed for trial in August. However the case was dismissed because of the failure of the Veddas to appear on respective trial days. Our

inquiries revealed that this was due to the turbulent situation that prevailed at that time in the country.

In mid-1990, the President R. Premadasa, entertained the Veddas' desire for an ultimate solution. In response, a meeting was called at Kandy, where the President met Tissahami and his tribesmen and the officers of the Ministry of Lands, the Mahaweli Programme and the Department of Wildlife Conservation. On that occasion, it was pointed out that the Veddas were claiming 1,500 acres for 38 families and that this remained unfulfilled.

A letter issued from the Presidential Secretariat after the 'Vedda Conference' conveyed to the Veddas' lawyer the decisions that were taken:

- * To demarcate approximately 1,500 acres *including the Vedda settlements of Kotabakiniya, Keragoda, Bulugahadena and Kandeganwila) from the land area gazetted as Maduru Oya National Park.
- * To declare that area as a sanctuary under the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance.
- * To take specific measures to protect and nurture "Vedda Waqnnietto Culture".
- * To establish a Trust or Board for this purpose under the Chairmanship of the Director, Wildlife Conservation, with representatives from other state and non-governmental organisations.

Thus the recommendations of the Vedda Conference could bring about some means to restore the Vedda community and its livelihood if they are implemented. But unless there is a strong policy basis to enforce these expectations, indigenous people will be left to a miserable fate; as those Veddas who have opted to retain their traditional life styles are unable to cope with the pace of socioeconomic and environmental changes being introduced into their isolated hamlets.

A major cause of the marginalisation of these people in the recent history of Sri Lanka has been lack of official interest and procrastination over policy and its implementation. Some irregular attempts to relocate them have left them more neglected, while the sudden surge of development in their homelands has left them isolated and disorientated. There was no official recognition of the Veddas rights until the Vedda Conference of 1990. Under these circumstances, in common with many other indigenous peoples of the world, Veddas in

Sri Lanka have been absorbed into village life or are dying out.

The Criticisms of relocation of indigenous people have often been based on ethnic and moral issues. They have been accustomed to an environment where they accumulate traditional wisdom, and perform rituals and religious activities related to their traditional lifestyles and resources. Eugene Linden (1991) recently wrote that 'development by encroaching on indigenous communities, not only deprives them of their lands, but also leads to disappearance of their indigenous knowledge'. The long-lived Vedda language is already disappearing due to relocation. Since some of their rituals and religious activities are bound with places or activities within their traditional environment, it is said displacement leads to cultural shock or psychological conflict.

The first revised text of the Draft Universal Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples (International Working Group for Indigenous affairs), while stressing the due recognition of the rights of protection and promotion of indigenous cultural, social, and economic life, specially refers to the need to preserve them when tied with the land or traditional occupations. Further it spells out the rights to possession and use of land or resources such people are traditionally attached to (IWGIA year Book 1989 : 154-158). Early this century, Spittel reported once on the Veddas' woes in these words: the soil of our jungles is honey to our mouths. Why should we be asked to leave our father's lands? Tissahami, the Vedda Chief in Dambana, is clear about his standing: "I want to keep my identity which runs through 2,500 years of recorded history and many millenia prior to that" (Sunday Observer 1 July 1991).

CONCLUSION

The Mahaweli Programme, which accepted the needs of Veddas to continue their traditions, planned to settle them separately in a familiar environment of Hennanigala. But some of the Veddas there are still unable to adapt. As their hunting and gathering life fades away, their social and cultural values too are waning. Although it is realistic to think of change in lifestyles when the resource for traditional livelihoods is declining, such a change cannot be superimposed on long established modes of life. The most considerate means is to allow the right of choice. In this regard the words of Javaharlal Nehru must be mentioned: 'let change come gradually and be worked out by the tribals themselves' (quoted in Darmadasa and Samarasinghe 1990 : 116).

[Extracts from "*Indigenous Land Rights in commonwealth Countries: Dispossession, Negotiation and Community Action*", proceedings of commonwealth Geographical Bureau Workshop, Christchurch, New Zealand, February 1992.]