

A special interest attaches to the Ahikuntakaya, the Ceylon gipsy tribe. They draw us by something of the bonds of the past, taking us back to the far off days, when man with his belongings and his herds of cattle, was ever on the move "in search of fresh fields and pastures new". In them we recall the dawn of human history, when man was a nomad living by the chase, and had not taken to a settled life. The Ceylon gipsy may not be a paraqon of virtue: he may occasionally help himself to the neighbour's poultry and a crop of **kurakkan** may have been "sensibly diminished after their departure from the neighbourhood". With all this, Ceylon would be the poorer if the Ahikuntakaya disappears from his horizon. His tribal life has a good deal fo the primeval stability about it, and he maintains the tribal integrity by a code of stern discipline and a rigorous judicial system peculiarly his own, which are not without their own lessons to us.

In spite of the indigenous appellation Ahikuntakaya by which they are known in Ceylon, there is no doubt that they are a division of the large Indian nomadic tribe known in South Indian as the Koraver or Kuraver a name which may best be derived from kuram, meaning palmistry, largely practised by Kurava women. "They sow not, neither do they reap" is literally true of the roving gipsy of Europe as it is true of our Ceylon Ahikuntakaya. The Ceylon group has a classical name, a name which conveys the sense of a snakesnarer, as of a snake-charmer, a name which has passed through the earlier stages of Ahi-gunthika and Ahi-tundika.

It was on a day in April, 1950. going along the New Road from Colombo to Awissawella the sight of distant landscape dotted with little squat sheds unmistakably indicated an encampment of the Ceylon nomadic tribe of snake charmers. Nearer view confirmed my surmise. Approaching the camp, there was little animation. At the entrance to one of the sheds was a young Koraver lass who answered to my enquiries addressed in Telugu and I learned that they had arrived only that morning, the advance party of a roving clan.

They were evidently not quite at home at this first camp for they had already moved the next morning to another site in the vicinity. Life in the new setting was by no means dull. In fact there is no dull moment in their lives. Men in groups were relaxing and enjoying a smoke. Dominating one such group was a figure altogether different from the rear. The centre of a group of elders. He was in stature short and stocky with a bushy grizzly beard and sharp penetrating eyes, looking at you from under shaggy eye-brows. Aratchi Rangasami, the tribal chief, was holding a 'darbar' with his advisers. In this surmise I was right, for the new site was no better than the one they left. Too close to the main road, the incessant motor traffic was not good for their donkeys, as these need a tree area to wander over and shoots of grass to nibble at. The site also lacked the seclusion they so much prize.

Thoughts such as these did not trouble the women whose hands were quite full with work of preparing food. The camp presented a diversified scene. At most places,



THE AHIKUNTIKAYAS

the pot of rice was boiling merrily, with the women busy preparing the curry-stuff. Having arrived only that morning, there was little of meat or fish. Jak was in season and plentiful. It was growing on the site and bearing heavily; and no doubt they freely helped themselves to as much of the green fruits as they cared to have, while women were slicing the jak, children did their little bit. Their share of the work was peeling the jak seeds, striking them with a boulder over a grinding-stone. There was no dearth of coconuts. The sliced jak with coconut milk, and ground lump of chillies, all went into the cooking pot, to form the delicious jak stew to go with the rice food. Jak stew was the relish all over the camp that day. One shed alone presented a different scene. Here



the woman was grinding kurakkan over a small grind-stone. What was she doing, I ventured to ask. "Making rotti" was the reply. Kurakkan rotti is a favoured item in the menu of this hardy race. Never a sickly one did I see in the whole camp. Children are not the lean and hungry-looking tots you find, for example, in an insanitary Kinnaraya village.

After a good look round, I joined the group, dominated by the central figure of aratchi Rangaswami, the chief of the clan. The Ahikuntakaya chief is the nearest approach to tribal chief of the early days of human history when man was largely a nomad and had not begun a settled life.

From their new camp to the larger coconut garden at Kottawa, the estate known as Bangalavatta, was the next move. Here they felt settled and there they kept on until they struck camp almost a fortnight later. A count taken of their leafy tenements, and the human and the live stock yielded these figures: 14 sheds, housing 45 souls - 17 men, 16 women, and 12 children, 27 dogs, 31 donkeys, 6 hens and one cock. Cats have no place in their domestic economy.

With the early dawn, the camp awakens. Some take plain strong tea and string hoppers from a neighbouring

boutique where there is one at hand, or cold rice left over from the night meal, with pol sambol. The morning repast over, men and women leave the camp, men with their cobra baskets and women on their rounds of fortune telling. Except for the children and a few women, who have work to do, 'the whole camp was deserted. Dogs which were silent on your earlier visits when the camp was full, were now very vigilant. They no doubt have a keen sense of responsibility keeping up a continuous growl and incessant barking. Quietened by the very old who remain in charge of the camp, the dogs leave you in peace. At the Aracci's hut, his daughter-in-law Anavakka was making tea. A pot of water with tea leaves has been brewing for some time. The arome of the tea was filling the air. After a good deal of boiling, the tea was strained in a porcelain tea-cup. Dropping a lump of sugar in the hollow of her palm, she began imbibing the tea, a sip at a time, lapping up a little sugar - an idea indeed in enjoying a cup of tea!

A gipsy camp is best seen in the evening, when their habits and ways of life are seen at their fullest. Men return from their snake-charming rounds, with the **pam petti**, or the snake-basket, and women from their fortune-telling tramps. Good earnings make her return rather triumphant. As she comes, one of the women relieves her off her baby, and she empties the contents of her cloth apron on to a winnor. The men too would have by now returned, as also those who had set out to ferret out rats, iguana or mongoose. The Bangalavatta encampment was buzzing with life as I entered it of an evening. The men had a successful hunt. Two of the men as they came, were a sight indeed, one holding about six field rats on one hand, and a coiled talagoya (iguana) in the other, while his companion had an iguana and the weapon of the chase - a short sharp crowbar, one end flattened into a sharp cutting edge, and a long ill-hook. Their mud-bespattered body and loin cloth were eloquent of the hard work in ferretting out the reptiles from their holes underground. Equally stimulating were scenes in the rest of the encampment. One of the catches included a big mongoose. The men soon fell to skinning the game. This was a dextrous process. The whole skin is peeled off as neatly as one removes a shirt or coat. The meat is cut up in slices and handed over to the women, who are already busy grinding the curry-stuff, scraping the coconuts, pressing and squeezing out the coconut milk, pounding the rice, winnowing and measuring it, in short, food-making in all its various stages.

At all the tenements, hearth fires blazed with the pot of water over the fire covered with another pot. As the water warmed, a quantity of rice was measured out, a measure or two, according to the needs of each family. The women do this very neatly. The rice is well washed, first in cold water, then in warm water from the pot of hot water over the fire. The Washing over, handfuls of the rice are deposited in the cooking pot of water. In time the rice-pot froths and boils over, and is removed from the fire and kept to cool. Vegetable or meat curry is the principal savoury dish. The favoured vegetable is the brinjal cut up into slices, and cooked with dry fish, mostly sprats. The had part of



7 feet wide, and a height of about 5 feet, filled with a medley of things, rolls of old talipot leaves, snake-baskets piled one above the other, a long and squat coirstinged bed, cooking vessels both brass and earthen, the **pasrayi** or grind-stone, an array of bottles and tins of salt and spices, a small kerosene lamp, and a pot of water. The belongings of a hut are not all junk, for some of the tenements have a good range of brass vessels, as at Aratchi's hut. A talipot shelter once made lasts for almost six months, when it is replaced by another. A family has often a number of old talipot rolled stored inside. When an encampment is wound up, the women carry head-loads of the folded leaves, with the men taking the baskets of snakes, and bags of pots and pans piled over the donkey, sedately trotting beside them, followed by their faithful dogs.

Though there is no home in the sense of a settled life, the Ahikuntakaya woman has a place of her own in the economy of her simple household. She can be pretty, as the grey-eyed girl Anavakka the daughter-in-law of the chief. She has a number of brass vessels to polish, and pots and pans and domestic appliances to safeguard. As the men are largely abroad, the woman is more the guardian of the home than the man. She looks after the business of the household, and busys herself over the household work. Life on the move makes it her special care to take stock of her household effects, which are difficult to sort out and safeguard in the medley of the camping and breaking camp.

Despite his nomadic life the Ahikuntakaya has a rather elaborate domestic equipment of pots and pans, more than one would expect of a tribe ever on the move. The tribal mistress indeed believes in having a range of vessels each for a separate purpose. The names as given by Anavakka, the daughter-in-law of the Aratchi and the mistress of her household are **kadava**, the water-pot, a completely round and bulging vessel with a narrow mouth for storing water; the **kunda** or the rice-cooking pot, a vessel with a longish and round body with a proportionate mouth; the curry-pot or **pul chatti**, mouth flat and flaring; **koppa malle** (Kappu muta) the vessel covering the pot of boiling rice; **sarginne** or the wide-mouthed water-vessel of brass; and **tale** or the brass basin; **vala** or the tin pot with a wire holder for use as a bucket to draw water; **uppu-botale** or the stringed coconut-shell for holding salt; and **dhangi** or the ladle of coconut-shell. Other appliances are the **rolu** or the rice-pounding mortar; **rongali** (rokali), the rice-pounder, **sat**, the **kulla** or winnow; **irman**, the coconut-scraper (Sinhalese hiramane); **pasrayi**, the grind-stone; **gundrai**, the grind-stone roller; **narak bunak** or the bag of reeds; and at last but not least, the **pam petti**, the snakebasket. The kitchen implements, **aurakatti**, the long knife and **madkathi**, the heavy knife, complete the equipment of Anavakka's household, an equipment which speaks of a standard of their own quite high for a nomadic life.

the sprats being neatly tipped off, showed the discrimination that the women bestowed in food-making, which was not a little surprising in these homeless wanderers - in marked contrast to the overdrawn picture generally presented of these people as "unclean, ill-clad and unkempt". A quantity of green chillies go into a mixed vegetable and dry fish curry. Coconut is scraped, and coconut milk liberally added to the curry-stuff, which is duly placed over the hearth in a curry-pot (**pul-chatti**). Each family cooking for itself, the preparations vary. Coconut **sambol** is in general favour. Scraped coconut ground into a ball of paste and ground red chillies enter largely into the composition of a dish of field-rats and iguanas! Very hot and spicy curries is the rule. Speaking of rats, a great deal of hesitancy prevailed to admit that they eat rats. At my first visit, the Aratchi disdained in strong terms the idea of eating rats maintaining that the rats are hunted for the snakes and dogs only. Later, skinning and cutting up of rats, and iguanas, all of which went into the same pot, exposed the truth when they were prepared to go further and assert that the rat is as good eating as the iguana, and possibly it is. Food indeed is a matter of taste! Environment no doubt plays its own part. Camping by the side of the tanks in the North-Central province, men take to fishing with hook and line, and have daily a good catch of fish.

Talipot palm shelter that is the gypsy home is an arched structure of strips of palm leaf sewn together, with an average overall length of 9 feet, an open entrance over