

THE COAST VEDDAS

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Till a few years ago, the very remote coastal areas in East Lanka boasted colonies of wild-looking men very much like Veddas. Even today, a few of these people exist. These are the coast Veddas of Lanka.

Though these people share the same leathery dark skins unkempt hair and terocious faces of the true jungle. Veddas, a closer look at them will reveal that the Coast Veddas, are not so short as their jungle counterparts and that while the jungle Vedda is dark and dirty, the Coast Vedda is dark and salty! One is a hunter; the other, a fisherman.

Coast Veddas claim that they originally came from the jungle themselves and though this is probably true, this claim is hotly refuted by the jungle Veddas!

Though the rapid development of the country has done a lot for these people, some of them are still steeped in the quaint customs of bygone days. It is an absorbing experience to meet them in the remote east coast villages like Verugal, Sagamam and Panichchenkerni. Speaking of development, it is an interesting fact that a former ferryman at Verugal was once a full-blooded Coast Vedda!

Dying out

As a distinct group these people are dying out so fast that if one is lucky enough to stumble on them, he would find that often, a colony is made up of just two or three families. Each Coast Vedda colony consists of a couple of huts and is sited in rather in accessible places close to the sea. The huts have wattle and daub walls and straw roofs, and are squat structures in the middle of a clearing. If by chance the sea is not within hailing distance of these huts, you may be sure that there is at least a lagoon or village tank close by. These Vedda fishermen simply have to live near some expanse of water.

In every Coast Vedda colony you are bound to see a large number of fowls strutting about. But for some unaccountable reason, eating fowl-flesh is strictly taboo for these folk. It is said that Coast Veddas will never eat anything that walks on two legs. The consumption of eggs



too, is forbidden and the fowls are reared only for sale or barter. Periodically the village folk call at these colonies and buy fowls, eggs, grain and honey from these people. The village Mudalalis, however, do not pay for such goods in cash. Instead, they resort to the traditional system of giving them textiles, knives, tobacco and betel in exchange.

Honey is collected by Vedda youngsters often not more than fourteen years of age, who are experts at locating beehives merely by placing their ears on the tree trunk and listening for the tell-tale hum of the bees. The honey is collected and stored, not in bottles as one would expect, but in dried-out gourds. Incidentally, the storage of honey in this way is said to preserve the flavour and medicinal efficacy of honey to a greater extent than storage in bottles. Though Coast Veddas do not eat the flesh on fowls they relish venison, pork, wild buffalo meat and in fact, all other varieties of four-footed flesh.

It is difficult to state accurately, what religion these people follow, but it appears to be at least distantly related to Hinduism. Ruins of their ancient temples can still be found in a few coastal areas north and south of Batticaloa. Unlike the temples of most other eastern religions, these temples appear to have been modest affairs of about forty feet in length. It is said that these always faced east and were distinguished by the presence of small wells each barely two feet in diameter on the western side.

The Coast Veddas remaining today have an altar inside their temple on which is placed a model of a fishing boat and also miniatures of the various fishing gear they employ. These folk worship a deity whom they call "Thoni Theivam" (- "Boat God"). They believe that he is the most powerful god there is. They also reverence a goddess called Ammal who is said to be able to both cause and cure all types of skin diseases. It is said that some of these folk also worship their dead but the exact form of such worship is not known.

An important activity of Coast Veddas is Devil dancing. These sessions always commence very late in the night and are executed by groups of about ten men dancing in relays till the wee hours of the morning. The women and children do not take part in the dance but watch the dancers and keep time by clapping their hands to the rhythm of the dance. The participants are clad only in Margosa leaves except for the leader of the troupe, who wears a strip of spotless white cloth his waist.

Dances are staged only on specific occasions such as when there has been a particularly good catch of fish or when someone of their tribe is sick and the devil believed to be causing the sickness has to be exorcised. Dances also take place on all festival days, and it is only on such days village folk are able to watch the dance.

From the morning of the day of the dance, no adult member of the tribe is allowed to eat anything till the dance is over. But at the end of the dance a real feast follows, rounded off by a session of toddy-drinking by both the men and the women. If the dance is staged to cure a sick man, then, before the commencement, a large oyster shell full of buffalo milk is placed on a raised platform in front of the temple. When the dance ends at dawn, the sick man is fed with the milk, the dregs being given to the youngest baby in the colony who appears to be in poor health. On the day of the dance, the temple is gaily decorated with tender coconut leaves, margosa leaves and with white cloth banners and flags.

Experts

At the commencement of the proceedings the model of the fishing boat is withdrawn from the altar, taken three times round the temple in procession, and then reverently placed on the roof of the temple. It is replaced on the altar only on the following day by the oldest unmarried male of the tribe.

Quite understandably, Coast Veddas are experts in fishing. They do not confine their fishing to the sea, but go after all kinds of marine life, whether these be in the sea, lagoon, pond or even large irrigation channels. For sea fishing they use nets that are conventional except for their peculiar shape. They very seldom go out deep-sea fishing preferring instead to row or sail a mile or two out to sea. In fact, some of them seldom set foot on a fishing boat and confine their fishing activities to wading into the sea and catching what they can.

It is said that coast Vedda can by merely studying the pattern of the ripples on the surface of the water caused by the fish passing underneath, tell not merely the type of fish but also the size of the shoal that is swimming by. Besides

nets, they also use the usual rod and line, but the rod is cut from a particular species of tree and when such rods are dipped in the water now and then while waiting for a bite, they are said to impart a particular odour to the water which then assumes a fatal attraction for the fish.

Perhaps the most interesting mode of fishing the Coast Vedda uses is, believe it or not, the good old bow and arrow! The business end of the arrow is tipped with a nail - perhaps as a concession to modern times! Since a calm surface of water is essential for fishing with bow and arrow, only fresh water fish are caught by this method.

It is worthwhile watching such a bow and arrow fisherman patiently stalking fish, eyes fixed on the surface of the water bow and arrow "at the ready". Suddenly his expert eye will discern a minute change on the surface of the water and in a flash, he will flex his bowstring and send the arrow twanging into the water with deadly accuracy. With a deftness born of generations of experience this uneducated man would have allowed for "the angle of incidence" and "angle of refraction" that the physics student normally struggles in master in the classroom! Well, up comes a large fish with the arrow jutting its middle. The Vedda will calmly extract the arrow, slip the fish into the basket at his hip, hone the metal arrow head on a flat stone and resume pacing up and down the bank.

Traps

Since life is still a struggle for these people, the adult male is ably helped by his wife and children to provide for the family. The women, armed with rattan baskets open at both ends, will wade into the lagoon and set traps for sprats and prawns. A few hours later, they go back and collect their catch. When there is a glut of fish, the women and children slit open bigger fish and salt and dry them.

It seems that Coast Veddas cannot be as dirty as they look, considering how much of their working hours is spent in water! It is common to see boys barely seven or eight years old expertly diving off fishing boats and racing each other over long distances. Visitors to our ancient tanks will tell of young Coast Vedda lads suddenly materialising out of nowhere and begging them to toss coins into the tank for them to retrieve. Undaunted by the many tangled weeds in the water, these youngsters will with the coins clenched between their teeth.

Till lately, Coast Vedda children did not attend school and the boys spent their time gathering honey, clearing land for cultivation and fishing, while the girls mined the younger children, pounded grain and helped with the cooking.

Perhaps surprisingly, Coast Veddas and the people in adjoining villages get on famously simply by respecting each other. In many ways the coast Veddas and the villagers need and complement each other. Moreover, the welcome winds of change blowing over the land have so fanned the desires of these humble folk-especially the younger set-to integrate with the rest of their countrymen, that in the very near future the last Coast Vedda will be only a very pleasant memory.

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