



RODIYAS AND THE SOCIETY

This introduces us to the wider field of Rodiya life in relation to the society. While the social taboo worked strong and still operates in so far as the main life functions are concerned, as means of livelihood, social relations, religious worship, etc., Rodiya life has not been without its sunnyside. In a proper appraisal of the life of the Rodiya vis a vis the society, the fact has to be faced that his circumstance varies differently in different parts of the Island. For a distant echo of Rodiya life in the days when he was not a victim to the social taboo of later days, we have to resort to the Wannu, where the characterization of Rodiya life is something very different from what it is elsewhere. The Wannu Rodiya man or woman may not be so light skinned or handsome as some of the Ratnapura of Kandyan Rodiya, and he has a thinner frame of body, but socially he enjoys a better status and is economically more prosperous. Educationally too, as Hugh Nevill in speaking about them sixty years ago has remarked "they have always been able to have their sons

taught to read and write at the Pansala and actually almost all of them can both read and write". On the religious plane also he enjoys a freedom of worship, not obtaining elsewhere. Today, the Rodiyas of Ma-aeliya tells us that they go well dressed to the temples, and their women too go to worship in clean dress. They daily take the pansil and the monks administer to them socio-religious rites such as pirth chanting, bana-preaching, etc. On the food front, the Wannu Rodiyas are more or less above want. As Baba Huluvaliya of Ma-ealiya village tells you, though feelings of superiority stand in the way of the higher classes mingling with them at social functions or of employing them to work in their paddy fields, they do not hesitate to go to him at his kuppayama on their own business. This again is a pointer indicating that the Rodiya as a class was not the despised sect that he has developed to be in the not too distant past. Glimpses such as these read with Nevill's remarks that he is "satisfied that the Navaratna Valli Rodi is one of the best

marked races in Ceylon and not mere outcasts", should persuade us to revise the general idea about the Rodiya.

The other side of the picture is what is presented to us in Rodiya life in the rest of the Island. That the Rodiya of the Kandyan days has had a tough time we are aware. But he has always had the gift of taking a realistic view of life with its ups and downs; and among the chief attributes which has helped him to live in his entertainment value which the society despise his low social values - or possibly because of them-has not been unwilling to accept, and even to encourage. In support of this lighter side of Rodiya life, we have the evidence of Sasira of Udugalpitiya, Kadugannawa, who in his time has conducted troupes of Rodiya dancers at special social occasions. Among the certificates he was proud to show was one issued by the Ceylon Industries Fairs Association to the effect that "Sasira of Udugalpitiya brought a troupe of Rodiya women dancers for dancing and they danced at the Exhibition. The dancing was appreciated by the audience". The Exhibition was held at Victoria park, Colombo, from 28th April to 7th May, 1939. For further insight into the life of a Rodiya dancing girl, we cannot do better than listen to the reminiscences of Vasana Valli of Talavitiya, a dancer of repute in her youth, dancing at weddings and social functions, now infirm and old with her three score and ten years of age and living at her Talavitiya hamlet, still proud to recall memories of her dancing life. She was pretty and wore good jewellery; and had a silver waist girdle of eight chains. Apart from dancing, she was skilled in spinning brass discs on the tips of her fingers, spinning five discs at the same time and supported three discs on the nokku stick and spinned them, resting the stick on her nose. When she talked of her mother, who danced at wedding festivals, she was full of emotion. At one of these dances her mother was favoured by the attentions of a certain with whom she lived and by whom she had two children, herself and her brother, the father of Huluvaliya Janaratna Villiya of the village.

Rodiya dance songs are not easy to collect as Rodiya dancing at social functions is a thing of the past. It was gratifying therefore to have got Vasana Valli to sing to me a few dance-songs, two of which I here reproduce with a free English rendering as typical specimens of Rodiya dancing songs :-

1

Situkula mativaru sitina sabamada omari papayana
neyiyadam,
patunava inapita andina selaya
rali rali palam
Dutuvita salelun vadavana vehesaya
piyavuru rantati men,
Natumata novabiya madakut
sihininga natuvayen

1

Before the Lords of wealth assembled
I dance the alluring maiden dance,
Draped in a new silken sari
Trailing down in folds of grace;
The golden balls of swelling breasts



Excite the susceptible youthful mind;
I fear not the swaying dance,
Out to please you with swinging gait,

2

Vassata Kiridunnam nadanne
Visva ati mati sabe sitinne
Asvaha natamage natum balanne
Raksavennata tagi labenne

2

Fed with milk the calf does not bleat,
And in the assembly, noble Lords in good
faith do sit,
Behold my dance and cast no evil glance
For my livelihood, gifts do I seek.

3

Porana ape gadin Kiyana Kavi melesin
asana guna samidunge
Elesa ada ma visin Kiyana Kavi asamin
vilasa nada Kovulange
Savana mana pinamin,
bedana dana satutin,
ganimi sita lesavunge
Tagi mata denamin satutukaravamin
lobahara samidunge

3

I sing songs which, our ancient gadi sang
And which your virtuous lords now do hear. And listen to
the songs I today sing,
Sweet as the cuckoo's clarion song
To your ears and heart appealing,
To give me gifts and fulfil my heart's
desire,



Giving me ungrudging and thus
Oh! Lords, free yourself of greed.

4

Denna mata tagi hita venna honda
talekata,
Onna Kaviyak hituna
Venda pihitak nositanta karunak nata
Ganda mage ata allanta ida labunot
Menna pinkanda penuna,
yanda gamanatra venda enava mata
Denna nata pere pavina

4

Gifts do I seek to dance and sing
the more,
Pause not to take me by my hand
If so it pleases you Lords;
The Lords unmoved, I see,
Very pillars of virtue,
'Tis time for me to leave
And of gifts I get none,
And my evil Karma ever pursues me.

As an example of singing the praises of a Rodiya
beauty, the following quatrain by an anonymous author of
about the 19th century, cannot be surpassed :-

Uvana pipi sare delavana ratupulla
Deneta induvare tungutanahasa tulla
Melesa divasare lesudala Rodi kella
Ratnapurambara disi pirisanda tulla

O thou, fair of face like the
full-blown lotus
Thy rosy lips the red lilies match
Thine eyes blue as the induvara flower,
With swelling breasts of swanlike shape
Thus resplendent, the livelong day,
O! Rodi girl!

The full moon shining over Ratnapura sky.

That Rodiya women as a rule were conscious of their
entertainment value is obvious. It is equally true that they
used their charms - even exploited them to a certain extent
- for their economic betterment, which was really one of the
few avenues open to them to keep their flag flying. They
have been freely talked of as immoral, or even called
prostitutes. It is not for me to discuss the rights or the
wrongs of their conduct. But it seems to me that to apply
conventional ethical standards to a group of men and
women labouring under age-old social taboos, is to miss
the point. The only yard stick by which their conduct can be
measured is that of the inescapable realities of life. Judged
by such a standard, on the bar of enlightened public opinion
they stand more sinned against than sinning. Actually, their
morals are not so bad.

What however is obvious is that the feminine of the
species has always been an interesting factor, and society
as a rule has been more tolerant of the Rodiya woman, who
makes herself conspicuous by her speciality of turning the
brass plate on her fore-finger, dexterously twirling it round
and high, or projecting a number of balls, and skillfully
catching them alternately without letting them fall. She also



Ma-aeliya village has three physicians practising, as they said, Sarvanga Vedakama, or the treatment based on Ayurveda, and Sarpa Vedakama, or snake-charming, the late being known to be one of their traditional specialities. Vedaralas of other societies are reported to teach them the healing art, who also come and attend on the Rodiya patients of the Wannu.

Taboo in the sense of "a prohibition to which a religious or magico-religious sanction is attached", has not had a uniform application to the Rodiya in his social relations, as it varied with the time and place. Despite the reference that the Rodiya is more dreaded than despised, he has been regarded by the society with mixed feelings both good and evil. This is abundantly evident today, and scarcely needs illustrating. I would however mention an instance or two of some interest to this aspect of Rodiya life-which support the idea that the Rodiya is not altogether so avoided a person as convention has made it out to be. At one of my recent investigations at Talavitiya, was a man in the company of the rest who was keen on giving me some information of Rodiya religion. As happens at such gatherings, men come and go; and after he had left, I learned that he was not one of them but a high caste peasant. On the same day latter on, walked in a woman at this village, who looked distinctly different and respectable, whom I learned later to be a neighbour, of the Wahumpura class. The social friendliness revealed is obvious. In this very village is one Mahadurage Lavneris, reported to be a Salagama - age 45 - born at Totagamuva; he lost his parents when he was a child and left home when 10 years of age. Roaming about the Island doing odd jobs, he lived in Colombo for about 15 years, doing cooly work. He married first a Salagama woman who died leaving behind 4 children. After this he came to Talavitiya area and worked in the gem pits. During this time he came over to the Kuppayama of Talavitiya and settled down taking unto his wife a Rodiya woman - with whom he has been residing here for about 20 years. He has 5 children, 1 son and 4 daughters, his eldest daughter being given in marriage to a Rodiya at the Talavitiya Kuppayama in Mawanella. Instances such as this go to show that to others in difficulties, the Rodiya village has been a home of refuge which incidentally is a factor in explaining the differences in physical characters that we find in the make-up of a Rodiya settlement.

The relationship of the Rodiya with the Kinnaraya is among the interesting side lights in his life story. On this subject, according to Nevill the Rodiyas maintain that the Kinnarayas face them, they say "Oh Vedda (with an honorific affix) we kalala weavers are going here", and standing in a reverential attitude, wait for the Rodiya to pass, and that this respect is said to be exacted by violence if necessary. Nevill however adds that a Kinnaraya would no doubt indignantly deny such a submission to the Rodiya. It is nevertheless still narrated that in the past when a Rodiya and a Kinnaraya happen to meet in a narrow lane, they would stand glaring at each other, until either of them got nervous and ran off, or until some one of a higher class came and told both to clear away. The hereditary enmity is kept green in such

seems to have had something of the character of the European gypsy in her make-up, pretending to a knowledge of fortune telling by palmistry, which she was supposed to know, though little of this is evident today.

That they address different persons in different ways is an information of interest that Nevill gives. Thus a Goigama Hamuduruwo, or Budu Hamuduruwo; a Salagama Hamuduruwo; a Aratchi Hamuduruwo; Batgama, Gurukamkarana Hamuduruwo; a Nekati, Gurunanse; a Badahaela or potter, kankanam Hamuduruwo, a Raduwa, a Pedi Hamuduruwo; a Viskarma, Badal or Lokuru Hamuduruwo. Such niceties of forms scarcely prevail today.

Among the many generalizations that are freely made of them is that they are a very mysterious people, that they work magical charms and conjure you, and that they are more dreaded than abhorred. Much of this has no basis today. Except for the ordinary protective charms, a knowledge of which most vedaralas and others possess, the Rodiyas have no speciality of magic, either for good or for evil. At least they have none now. Of medicine, a knowledge of which also stands to their credit, or discredit. I have seen little evidence except in the Wannu where the



proverbs as "රොඩියාට කින්නරා හමිබ උනා වගෙයි" like the Rodiya meeting the Kinnaraya", or "රොඩියාට කින්නරයා මුණ ගැසුනා වගෙයි" "staring in the face like the Rodiya and the Kinnaraya", or again "like the cobra and the polonga" (the Russel's Viper); all of which recall the hereditary enmity between the Rodiya and the Kinnaraya. At the Talapitiya colony of Rodiyas in the district of Kegalle, a reference by the residents to their attitude towards the Kinnaraya was very amusing, asserting as they did that if ever a Kinnaraya dared to come there, they would assault him and drive him away. The Kinnaraya by habit wears his hair short, round which turns the story as told me at this visit by the Rodiyas of Talapitiya, that a Kinnaraya once asked for a Rodiya girl in marriage. Indignant at the insult, they assaulted the unfortunate Kinnaraya, and cut off his knotted hair. Ever since that, the Kinnaraya has worn his hair short, or tucked it up, without being done in the usual Kondae, the hair knot. Though such is the traditional account there is no occasion today for any antagonistic behaviour, and both classes are content to let bygones be bygones in the economic struggle which faces them both today almost to the same extent. There is no antagonism against the Ambattaya either (Barber), the other class supposed to be traditionally inimical to them. The only reaction of these traditions is the fact that the Rodiya does not beg or stop to any favour today of either the Kinnaraya or the Ambattaya.

Lists of castes given by such authorities as Knox, Cordiner, De Saram, Armour and the Niti Nighantuva, all consign the Rodiya to the bottom in the list with the Kinnaraya immediately above. Parker however holds a different view and considers the Kinnaraya "the lowest

caste in the Island", whose rank, he remarks "is so low that, as some of them admitted to me, they addressed even the Rodiyas, whom many wrongly believe to be the lowest race in the Island, as Hamuduruwo, 'my Lord' and do not pass them on a path without first asking permission to do so. I was informed that the Rodiyas at once interfere if any of the men attempt to allow their hair to grow beyond the upper part of the neck, and order them to cut it shorter". These remarks giving the Rodiya a status higher than the Kinnaraya, reflect the Rodiya sentiment as Nevill has recorded, and as the Talapitiya Rodiyas claimed in the course of my enquiries. As an account of the Kinnarayyas will be separately published, nothing more need be said here on the subject than that as a class, the Rodiya appears to be definitely of a higher type, racially speaking, so far as physical characters go; though socially today, he is lower than the Kinnaraya, and this obviously accounts for his being generally relegated to the bottom in the lists of the social groups of the Island. The Rodiya has been more a tribe than a caste and still displays many a tribal pattern in his present life. The course of social evolution of the middle ages of Ceylon, finds him already a tabooed tribe, shunned by the society and disfavoured by the priesthood. This reacted against his ever developing into a sizable social or economic unit. The feudal pool of the Kandyan days completed his downfall, caught up in the centripetal conception of society, with the king as the centre and a circle of social factors in an ever widening orbit of inter-dependent services and functions, with no place for the residuum of the Rodiya except as an outcast.

Courtesy : Cultural Anthropology of the Rodiyas