



GALOYA TO HENANIGALA

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The Veddas who are the inheritors of our forests from the dawn of history had been scraping a mere existence by living in rock caves, hunting game, gathering honey and in later years doing scanty chena cultivation. With the inroads of civilization, like multi-purpose Irrigation and Land Development Projects in Gal Oya and later under the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Scheme into their traditional lands, most of the original settlements like Hennebedda, Galebbe (in Gal Oya) and Dambana (Mahiyangana) were either displaced or wiped out.

Dr. R. L Spittel - the well known writer on Veddas, had these alarming words to say on the future rehabilitation of the Veddas in one of his books "Wild Ceylon" (in 1925), "Let us leave the last of the Vedda alone and not try to fashion them to our way. Let them die scattered and the Vedda will be a name".

Today we see the fate of these astounding words of premonition in regard to the rehabilitation of these fast dying out race, our aborigines of Sri Lanka. Rehabilitation and resettlement of Veddas had drawn the attention of the government from the days of the British regime to this

present day - post Independent era. Dr. R. L. Spittel, in his "Far off Things" (1933/57) had made these observations in regard to their rehabilitation: "So far all attempts by government officials and missionaries to civilize the Veddas have failed. Better it is not, to leave the Veddas in their green mansions where they wish to be, that their dust might mingle with that of their ancestors. Let us take the benefits of our civilization gradually to them. Let it not be charged to us that we weaned them too suddenly from the solitudes they loved, and forced on their unready minds, conditions of life with which they are unfitted to cope.

Vedda Country:

The Vedda country of Maha Vedi Rata nestled once upon a time in the present Gal Oya Valley. There unspoilt Vedda settlements like Hennebedda (of Dr. Spittle's favourite outposts mentioned in his fascinating books like "Vanished Trails", "Sevage Sanctuary") and many other idyllic Vedda hamlets like Gal-Ebbe were impounded by the waters of the Senanayake Samudraya. These were beginnings that led to the near extinction of the Veddas and its aftermath followed their rehabilitation in resettling them in

alien lands that came under the Gal Oya Development Board in 1950.

Having lived and worked in the Vedda country of Gal Oya from 1955-70 as a Village Officer/Asst. Lands Officer in settling colonists and resettling some of these Vedda off shoots, the writer had gained wide experience of the transition of their primeval lives to that of civilization in their new habitat.

Village units 1 & 2 in Paragahakelle and Wavinna were the first pioneer villages which were inaugurated in 1950 in resettling these primitive semi-vedda tribes. Here we were confronted with two conflicting worlds the old and the new. These semi wild people were labelled as "tank bed people" (as their ancestral homes got submerged by Senanayake Samudraya).

Hostile :

The elders were hostile to their being brought by force into these new environs which were not befitting to them socially. They were given a permanent built-in cottage (having a tiled roof). A lavatory too was provided for them. The extent of their homestead on which stood the permanent cottage was 2 acres, while the paddy field (irrigable one) was 3 acres.

Here commenced the two opposing factors confronting them. The built in cottage was something like a castle to them. They considered it not at all suitable for



their occupation as they were accustomed to living in bark huts or mud walled huts (roofs thatched with illuk grass)

So these elder people almost abandoned these so called "Stately Cottages" forced on them. They resorted to hunting and later to chena cultivation. The lavatory was totally forsaken. It fell into disuse. They preferred "the jungle toilet" to which they were traditionally used to.

Actually it took 10-15 years to adjust themselves to their new environment. The elders still took the call of the wild but the second generation of children took the transition into civilization in a slow and steady manner. It took them another 10-15 years to reach maturity and acceptance of their new alien surroundings. Today Paragahakelle and Wawinna villages which lie along the main road from Inginiyagala to Ampara are flourishing farming lands. It was ironical to say that he or she was of Vedda stock as it became a stigma on the society.

The paddy field was leased out to outsiders. These were the turmoils of civilization they were confronted with. They become the victims of the middleman who exploited them. New people transgressed into their new settlements in Paragahakelle and Wawinna.

Rehabilitation Mahaweli Areas :

The Accelerated Mahaweli Development Programme was conceived with a wide vision. Hence, learning the bitter lessons of shifting semi-primitive jungle people to other new settlements as experienced in the past in the Gal Oya region, the A. M. D. P. had second thoughts on shifting such forested people to new surroundings. This was done in a well planned out and phased rehabilitation manner considering their socio-economic conditions which were deeply rooted in them.

System "C" in Girandurukotte lies in the verdant Bintenna Pattuwa, the traditional homeland of these Vedda aborigines. Dambana and a cluster of Vedda settlements like Kandegamwela, Damanewela, Kivuleyaya were in the ambit of the development area of the MASL. The Maduru Oya National Park also lies within the precincts of these Vedda settlements. So these families had to be shifted, as most of them would either get wiped out or displaced by the inroads of Mahaweli development projects.



Vedda Resettlement:

The request for resettlement came readily from those affected people themselves. A few elders like hoary Tissahamy opted to stay behind in their "green mansions" like their ancestors had done.

These old Vedda settlers were given compensation for their displaced lands. Some had got amounts ranging from Rs. 10,000/- to Rs. 12,000/-. Most of them have invested the money in saving accounts. Some are running village boutiques where provisions and eatables are available. Such trades are limited to the second generation only.

Anthropologist:

Dr Seligmann and his wife Brenda, the two Anthropologists from the Cambridge University were one of those earliest scholars to do research on our aborigines in 1910. Their works are contained in a book titled "The Veddas".

Dr. Seligmann did research on the Danigala type of Veddas who lived on the Vedda ancestral hill called Danigala. The descendants of these classic Danigala Veddas on whom Dr. Seligman did research lived atop Danigala. In the late 1950's they came down to the foot hills of Rathugala (close to Namal Oya in Gal Oya) where lived Chieftain Handuna and his clan. Recently, Handuna died. His son Randunna now leads the clan as its chieftain at Rathugala (in Gal Oya Valley - off Namal Oya).

Dr. Seligmann in his "Veddas" had commented thus on the future facts of these aborigines, "The Veddas are coming more and more in contact with their Sinhala neighbours and it is extremely unlikely that the next generation will remain pure".

So today, the Veddas are almost extinct, only a few of their descendants called Gam Veddas (Village Veddas) live in isolated Vedda settlements of old, like Rathugala (off Gal Oya Valley), Pollebedda (Maha Oya), Dambana (off Mahiyangana) and in Henanigala (a Vedda resettlement off System 'C' Girandurukotte).

Vedda's Fate:

Dr. Nandadeva Wijesekera in his "Veddas in Transition" (1963) has analysed in detail the origins and the future of these primitive people.

"The Veddas of Ceylon are faced with the same

problem of losing their identity and their numbers. This phenomenon is not strange. It is natural, logical, and inevitable. The gradual disappearance of ancient races is not a novel feature. It has continued through human history. But, it is well to remember that the races are not eliminated purposefully nor can they be wilfully preserved in their pristine purity. The survival of a race depends on a number of factors, both physical and mental. The inherent power for survival is essential. The external forces conducive to such a survival is equally important. Where the need to survive and the urge for existence are keen, the continuation is almost assured, but where these are lacking the exception of survival is doubtful. A psychological disposition is certainly conducive to the survival of a race, both amongst the most primitive and the most advanced state of mankind".

So the same fate is bound to fall on these last remnants of a dying race, the Veddas, our aborigines, now living in scattered places like Pollebedda, Rathugala, Dambana and Henanigala.



In conclusion, let me quote the words of W. Somerset Maugham, to exemplify the present context of these Veddas in transition - "To say that a barbaric people gain in happiness when civilization is forced upon them, is hypocrisy. Is there any reason to suppose that they are less happy in their primitive state, than when compelled to accept a culture they do not want and reforms they see no need, for they are ruled by alien customs".

The Life Style of the Present Day Veddas:

Since writing this article reproduced from the 'Visitas of Mahaweli' issue of October 1989, much water has thereafter flowed down the waters" of the Vedda aboriginal settlements. Much attention has been also focussed from early this year under the aegis of the Cultural Survival of Sri Lanka with the blessings of the Ministry of Environment for the International Year of World Indigenous People. which is scheduled to be held this or next years.

In this regard wide publicity had been given for the participation of the remnants of the Veddas drawn from



the Dambana and Henanigala lot-led by Chieftain Tissahamy of Dambana who now has opted to stay in his own habitat in the core of the Maduru Oya National Park. A representative tribal people drawn from Dambana and Henanigala attended the ENVIRON Lanka which was held at the BMICH on 10.12.92 as a prelude to the holding of the International Year of World Indigenous People.

The few known Vedda aboriginal settlements (besides Dambana) coming down from antiquity are Pollebedda (off Maha Oya - Eastern Province - Dr. R.L. Spittel's favourite outpost which was founded by him in the 1940's which comprised those Veddas from Bingoda, Bandaraduwa, Phillegoda, Hennebedda lying in the Mahavedi Rata, now nestling in the Gal Oya region); Rathugala (Gal Oya Valley-off Bulupitiya - Bibile or via Inginiyagala-Namal Oya-Galgamuwa), where the Danigala type of Veddas live on whose ancestors Dr. Seligmann (in his 'Veddas' (1911) did his scholastic studies on these aborigines in 1908). At Rathugala lives a few of those off shoots led by chieftain-Danigala Maha Bandaraalage Randunna (his father Handuna former chieftain died). It is learnt that the Cultural Survival of Sri Lanka would be taking steps to represent those other tribal off shoots of Veddas now living in Pollebedda, Rathugala and other aboriginal settlements - most of which have been either abandoned or integrated with agricultural cum irrigation - human settlement projects. It is nothing but fair, to gather such Gam/Village Veddas who lived in those aboriginal settlements to be represented at the forthcoming International Year of World Indigenous People.

The living conditions of these hapless set of primitives coming down from Vedda ancestry scraping a bare existence of Living at Rathugala and Pollebedda are appalling. Their social - economic and most of all their health conditions are deplorable. Malnutrition is raging high. Hence some concerted effort by the authorities concerned should (forthwith take) meaningful care ameliorate their dire living conditions afflicted with health hazards. The Henanigala lot re-settled at Henanigala are on the other hand have got the benison of the Mahaweli Authorities in regard to their socio-economic-and health care. But the poor and hapless aboriginal people living at Rathugala and Pollebedda are an unfortunate lot left to their own mercy, as they appear for all intents and purposes living in a No man's land and left in the lurch, sans any effort spearheaded by the authorities concerned to better their lives. A couple of Dr. Spittel's characters like Kairawanniya and Goba still live at Pollebedda as patriarchs'

A Wannialaeto Vedda Cultural Trust and Vedda Museum are in the offing under the umbrella of the Cultural Survival of Sri Lanka it was reported in recent times, to be established at Damana. Here too, Rathugala and Pollebedda should not be forgotten or left alone when such cultural museums are set up. Here it is quite fitting to have such Cultural and Vedda museums (if these are proposed to be so) to be set up at Rathugala and Pollebedda or any other fitting aboriginal settlement, deemed fit enough.

For posterity purposes, our present and rising generations should know for themselves what those ances-

tors of our aborigines - the Veddas, proctised from time immemorial, their much treasured cultural practises like hunting with the bow and arrow, artefacts used in such ritual cultural dances and other practices of cultural Vedda Heritage. Hence it would seem fitting, to have the following artefacts of the Veddas to be exhibited at these proposed museums to be set up, not only at Dambana but also at Rathugala and Pollebedda.

- i. Bows and arrows and the stone bow (galdunna).
- ii. The typical short handled axe.
- iii. Fire made out of friction of Velan sticks. Specimens of such sticks could be displayed.
- iv. Strike a light and flint (Gini Kattuwa), modern way of igniting fire. It is a "C" shaped iron and a piece of crystalline quartz, when applied with a piece of rag and rubbed against them, when fire ignites.
- v. Their bags and pouches Hangotuwa, Maludena made out of deer skin to collect honey, Riti bags made out of the bark of the riti tree, monkey skin pouches to hold betel, arecanut for betel chews. Arecanut cutters.
- vi. Specimens of Vedda drawings drawn on rock cave surface.
- vii. Specimens of barks of trees like demota, opalu, etc. used as substitutes for betel and arecanut.
- viii. Artefacts used for rituals iike Kiri Korhaha dance, wooden arrow heads, Vedda Audes, axe, specimens made out of wood.

In conclusion, let me please make the following addendum:- In a paper presented to the Commonwealth Geographical Bureau Workshop on Indigenous Land Rights, Wellington, and Cristohurch, New Zealand, by U.

A. Chandrasena, Department of Geography, University of Kelaniya, Sri Lanka on 2.2.92, he has summed up in this paper presentation in regard to the future status of our Veddas, thus : "It is a well known fact that the Veddas had not been considered through development policies more appropriate to them. Although there were specific projects for them, some long established social and cultural factors prevented them from obtaining maximum benefit. Besides their eagerness to continue traditional life styles hardly allowed them to fully integrate with modern economic sectors. Due to lack of recognition of their wants and rights, in most instances, the development projects made them more disadvantaged. Mahaweli Project which accepted the needs of the Veddas to continue their traditions planned to settle them separately a familiar environment of Henanigala. But some of the Veddas there, are unable to adapt to the new society. As their hunting and food gathering life faded away, their social and cultural values, too are gradually waning. Although it is realistic to think of change in the life styles, when the resources for traditional livelihood is declining, such a change cannot be superimposed on their long established mode of life. The most considerate mean therefore is to allow them the Rights of Choice. The words of Jawaharlal Nehru which gives some validity in our case too, must be mentioned here (quoted in Dharmadasa at 1990 p. 116). "Let change come gradually and be worked out by the tribals themselves".

(Title of the above quoted Paper " Struggle for Survival of An Aboriginal Group: Destiny of Veddas in a Changing Environment of Sri Lanka".)

