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*Blessing of elders*

# THE SOCIAL ORGANIZATION OF THE TRADITIONAL VEDDA COMMUNITY

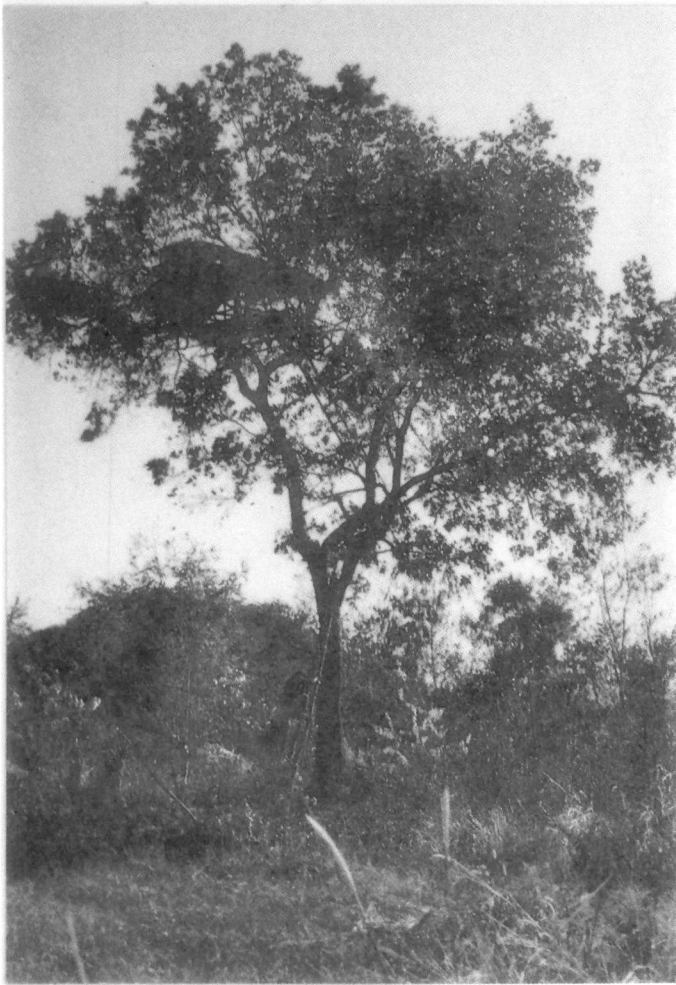
DAMBANE GUNAWARDENA

IT is no secret that groups of people who belong to Sri Lanka's Vedda tribe still exist. Who are the Veddas? Are they enemies of the environment, or friends? These are questions which need to be addressed with circumspection. The Vedda community now confined to a few villages as a group limited in number is not an extraordinary kind of humans. Any society which belongs to whatever civilization at some stage would have experienced a similar social level in its evolution. The only difference is that the people considered today as advanced had passed that stage at a very distant past, and

SOBA / September 1993

the Veddas are passing through a similar stage now.

However, as the word Vedda itself suggests the question arises whether the flora and fauna associated with the jungle have suffered destruction at their hands as their habitation is the jungle itself. Are the Veddas responsible for the present continuous destruction of forest? This is a question that would occur to anyone. The only way to arrive at a solution to this problem is to carefully investigate the social structure of the traditional Vedda tribe.



*A hut erected for the protection of a chena*

When, the earth's resources are being used up, its depletion is natural. Yet until recently the traditional societies of the world have consumed natural resource to a well-conceived plan. They have used up these resources in a manner that they would be replenished. Hence people didn't have to encounter any environmental problems till recent time. Scientific advance, increase of population, decline of human ethics like sharing and over-exploitation of large proportions of resources rapidly have led to a serious depletion. Thereby these resources find it difficult to replenish. Hence this environmental problem has assumed serious proportions. It is the problem of the highest magnitude. Thus destruction of the entire humanity could be caused by the advanced civilization.

An examination of the Vedda social structure indicate that it is built on a traditional systematic plan. The earliest groups of the Vedda tribe were engaged in hunting from place to place as their sole livelihood.

Then their members were small, the jungles extensive and infested with animals, enabled them to maintain this style of life without any obstacle for a considerable period. It is extremely difficult to ascertain accurate information about this period. At a later stage the Vedda community got accustomed to a dual system of livelihood. Since this period covers the last two or three generations it is possible to obtain accurate facts. During this period of dual livelihood they were engaged in hunting for some months and in chena cultivation rest of the year. With the elapse of this period they settled down to a more systematic existence psychologically and tribally. The Veddas who migrate to the plains from the hilly regions practise chena cultivation in sparsely forested stretches during the dry season. They sow their seeds in them, put up protective fences with logs around their chenas and return to their habitations to engage in hunting and the collection of honey as usual. They go back to their chenas only at harvesting time. This cycle of activity continues with regularity.

One could presume that this chain of activity would cause the destruction of flora and fauna. But they follow a pattern which is conducive to the resuscitation of resources consumed by their activities. Even in regard to chena cultivation they follow a set of principles which maintain ecological balance. Although these may be considered as tribal regulations, society accepted them as social conventions.

During the early period ancient forests with large trees were not cleared. Nor were chenas set up in all parts of the jungle. There were specifically selected areas for this purpose. The practice was to cultivate one area and leave it to go to another area for following year. In this manner when one area was left uncultivated seven or eight years, it provided sufficient time for environmental resuscitation. Then these areas became suitable for the next cycle of chena cultivation. This is a significant step taken to promote continuity of forest growth in these areas once used for chena cultivation.

Another important factor is that as a practice the Veddas do not cultivate or live even temporarily in the adjacent lands. The Veddas who consider their purity as vital as life itself, pitch their huts at least at a hoot's distance from one another. Between these two chenas remain a large stretch of jungle land. Although this practice was intended to maintain purity, and dislike for close association, it certainly encouraged the growth of jungle. Cultivated chena lands were generally small in extent. In the centre of the chena was pitched the hut and the protective log-fence was only a stone's throw from it. And no cultivation was done beyond the fence.



*Some handwork by Vedda Chief Tissahamy*

A Vedda cultivated chena would be about half an acre in extent. Since these small plots of chenas are surrounded by forests with large trees, which are never cut down they do not become fallow. Once these plots are abandoned, plants begin to grow and induce environmental recovery.

The avoidance of hilly land is a feature in their chena cultivation. They would prepare their chena plots at least at a hoot's distance from these uplands. This practice clearly indicates their concern for environment. It is reflective of unexpected farsightedness of a community generally considered intellectually backward.

Their traditional practices in cutting down trees and collecting honey are significant. To obtain a bee or wasp hive the whole tree was never cut. If it happened to be bearing time the tree was never touched. Normally only the required branch was cut leaving the rest of the tree alone. If it was a tree that bore an abundance of fruits which fed birds and animals it was never cut. If this offence was committed the leader had the authority to punish the culprit.

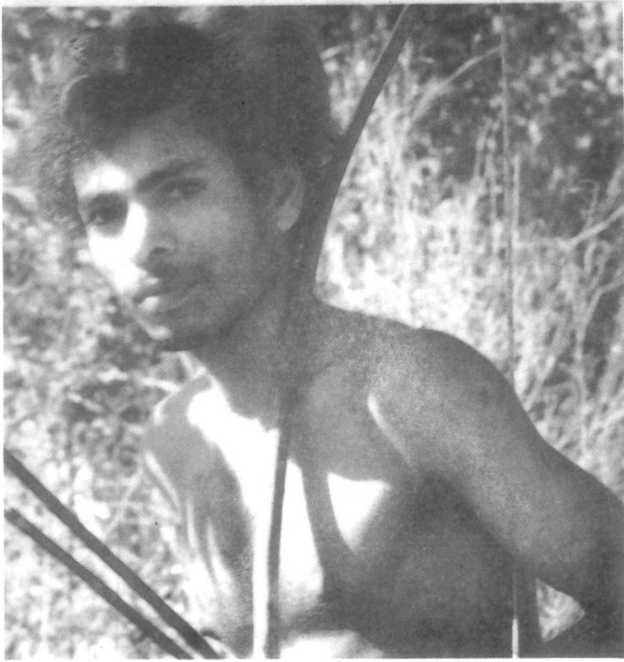
If a hole was made in a tree to remove a bee hive it was not the Vedda custom to leave it like that. Normally the  
SOBA / September 1993

burrow would be patched up with bits of plants and shingle to enable the bees to make a hive again. The Vedda will not remove any hive that comes across. He will examine it carefully and by the colour, the gait and behaviour of the bees and observe whether it contains honey. If not he will refrain from removing it.

Even in hunting the Vedda adopted a well planned out system. Very rarely did they target young or female animals, sucklings, feeding mother cows or pregnant cows were never hunted. The general rule was to kill the mature male animal. When he set out from his hut to hunt, he was often mindful of the animal he would target. He would never hunt any other animal. If he would see an animal eating or drinking he would wait till it has finished its feed to kill it.

In the Vedda villages when scope for hunting became limited, the custom was to share the flesh of the hunted animal among the dwellers. Hence it was not necessary for each family to hunt an animal as many families could share a single one under this system. It prevented superfluous killing and encouraged sharing and a sense of cooperation. The amount each family should receive was also decided. The administrator of the village, the smith who supplied the tools, and the person who chopped the animal got his due share. Thus all who





Mr. Gunawardena

were involved in the hunting activity and, those who performed various functions in the community were served. Even the disabled received charity shares. None in the village was left out of the distribution.

Had these jungle areas inhabited by the Vedda tribe living in harmony with its environment remained uninfiltated by outsiders it could have maintained its mode of living for a thousand years more. Can the society now accepted as advanced evolve a system capable of concerning the environment, preserving the society and protecting the limited resources that exist at the present time, or should this system be considered archaic and treated as a museum piece?

(Who are treated to be Veddas an indigenous Community in Sri Lanka live in jungle areas such as Dambana, Pallededa, Nilgala and Rathagala. The writer Mr. Gunawardena who is an undergraduate of the University of Sri Lanka is a grandson of Vedda's Chief, Uruvarige Tissahamy)

## WORLD BANK ON Indigenous Peoples

1. This directive describes Bank policies and processing procedures for projects that affect indigenous peoples.

2. The directive provides policy guidance to ensure that indigenous people benefit from development projects.

3. The terms "indigenous peoples", "indigenous ethnic minorities", "tribal groups" and "scheduled tribes" describes social groups with a social and cultural identity distinct from the dominant society that makes them vulnerable to being disadvantaged in the development process.

5. Because of the varied and changing contexts in which indigenous peoples are found, no single definition can capture their diversity. Indigenous people are commonly among the poorest segments of a population. They engage in economic activities that range from shifting agriculture in or near forests to wage labour or even small-scale market-oriented activities. Indigenous peoples can be identified in particular geographical areas by the presence in varying degrees of the following characteristics:

- (a) a close attachment to ancestral territories and to the natural resources in these areas;
- (b) self-identification and identification by others as members of a distinct cultural group;

(c) an indigenous language, often different from the national language;

(d) presence of customary social and political institutions; and

(e) primarily subsistence-oriented production.

8. The Bank's policy is that the strategy for addressing the issues pertaining to indigenous peoples must be based on the informed participation of the indigenous people themselves.

13. For an investment project that affects indigenous peoples, the borrower should prepare an indigenous peoples development plan that is consistent with the Bank's policy.

*Article 13.1 Governments shall respect the special importance for the cultures and spiritual values of the peoples concerned of their relationship with the lands or territories, or both as applicable, which they occupy or otherwise use, and in particular the collective aspects of this relationship.*

*Article 15.1 The rights of the peoples concerned to the natural resources pertaining to their lands shall be specially safeguarded. These rights include the right of these peoples to participate in the use, management and conservation of these resources.*

[Extracts from the World Bank Operational Directive 4.20 September 1991]