The Tank Village

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The tank, even in modern times, is the pivot on which life in the Dry zone revolves. The villages *(gam)* that depend entirely on tanks *(vaev)* for their economic sustenance are called *vaev gam* (Tank Villages). The structure of the Tank village and its functioning illustrate not only the economical use of land and water but also the ethical values of the ancient Sinhalese community.

The Tank village is the first of the four types of agricultural settlements in the dry zone that Nur Yalman distinguishes, the other three being, the Mountain villages of the Central highlands, the rain-dependent villages in the Eastern province and the Chena villages.

Yalman describes Tank villages thus:

These villages have a water reservoir; and the amount of water necessary for irrigation can be controlled by sluices and spills. The villagers, according to certain obligations inherent in their landholdings, work together to keep the reservoir, the bund, and the sluices in good repair. Houses are clustered around the watte on either side of the paddy field, and beyond the house garden there are the *chena* highlands." (31.21)

The tank village consists, typically, of four main components:

(a) the tank *(vaeva)*,
(b) the stretch of paddy fields *(kumburu yaaya)* ,
(c) the jungle *(haelaeva)*,
(d) the cluster of houses *(gam godaella)*

The tank, which is situated on a relatively higher elevation, provided water for agricultural and domestic

needs. It also provided fresh water fish for domestic consumption, the main varieties being *luullu, kaavaiyo,valai,* and *madaru*; Water plants such as *oalu, nelum, kekatiya* provide flowers for worship at the temple.

The stretch of paddy fields is always located below the tank. The canal which fed the fields with water ran through the stretch, dividing it into two main sectors. The jungle provided the village with firewood and timber, meat and honey. The cattle were grazed and allowed to rest in the jungle. A part of the jungle was used to grow vegetables and grains, and this part was called the *he:na* (chena).

Adjoining the paddy fields was the cluster of houses, *gam godaella*. The houses were small, built with mud-walls and thatched. Most of the houses shared a common compound, and this did not create major problems because all the inhabitants were related, through blood or matrimony.

The time-honoured obligations and conventions that bind the members of the tank-village constitute an integral part of traditional Sinhalese culture. A person who violates any of these conventions was dealt with by the chief of the village, in council, *variga saba:*. In certain areas, a council known as the *tovil paha* met to discuss violations and disputes.

In the region around the Deduru Oya, the *tovil paha* consisted of the following five members:
(a) the chief monk of the temple
(b) the native physician
(c) the mid-wife
(d) the washermarn and
(e) the officer in charge of the tank.
If someone was found guilty of some offence, such as diverting someone else's share of water to one's own paddy field, he would be debarred from using the services of the aforesaid members.

In distributing water to the paddy fields, the first to be served is the farmer who cultivates the field which is farthest from the tank. When each and every field was given water, the sluice was closed and no individual had the right to reopen it on his own accord.

With this water, paddy (vi:) was cultivated twice a year. The agricultural cycle is marked by two seasons (*kanna*) the *Maha Kanna* (main harvest) and *Yal Kanna* (minor harvest), the former using the waters of the North-east monsoons and the latter, the waters of the South-west monsoons.



One of the most important institutions that governed the distribution of the waters of the tank, specially during periods of drought, was that known as *diva mura* (water-share) or *betma* (division). The antiquity of these institutions is substantiated by both inscriptional and literary evidence.

"The inscriptions tell us that the waters of these tanks were divided amongst the cultivators, so that everyone had a share of the water. This is the practice even today... The inscriptions refer to the distribution of water-supply and of shares assigned to certain *viharas* `The distribution of water-supply shall not be appropriated'...The distribution of water in the 12 *kiriyas* (sowing extent of land) assigned to it from the *Mahamandala*.." (3.332). The *Visuddhimarga Sannasa*, a Sinhala text of the twelfth century, "uses the same term *diya mura* in referring to certain disagreements which resulted in the prevention of some getting the *diva mura*". (3.332)

Even today, the institution of the *betma* determines how the limited supply of water of a tank shall be distributed on equitable terms among all the farmers of the tank village. A hypothetical example may be used to illustrate the basis of this distribution: A village cultivates, when there is an abundant supply of water, say, one hundred acres of paddy lands, which belong to twenty one farmers or households. The extents of the paddy lands that they hold vary: there are fifteen farmers who cultivate five acres each; five farmers who cultivate three acres each and one farmer who cultivates ten acres. This may be charted as follows:

No of farmers	Extent of each plot	Total acreage
15	5	75
5	3	15
1	10	10
21		100

If, however, due to scarcity of water during the drought, only 40 acres can be cultivated, how will the 21 farmers share the 40 acres? The betma assigns the 40 acres just below the tank on a proportionate basis: the fifteen farmers who cultivated five acres each will now be given 2 acres each; the five farmers who cultivated three acres each will now be given 1.2 acres each; and the farmer who cultivated ten acres will be now given four acres, thus:

No of farmers	Extent of each plot	Total acreage
15	2	30
5	1.2	6
1	4	4
21		40

Thus, when the betma is in force, the original owners of the 40 acres just below the tank lose their right to their lands temporarily and the farmers who own land farthest from the tank can now move closer to it.

Another convention relates to the sharing of fish in the tank. During a drought, no single individual is permitted to fish in the tank. Fishing will be done on a communal basis, at a time and day determined by the entire village, under the supervision of the *gama-raala* (village-chief) or *vel-vida:ne* (field-officer). As a symbol of this agreement, a branch of a tree (*boa atta*) is placed on the bund.

On the appointed day, all the males of the village gather at the tank and engage in fishing and, all the fish so collected will be piled into heaps depending on their variety. At the end of fishing, the *gama-raala* will divide the collection on the basis of another time-honored convention, which may be described as follows:

(1) The first share will be given to the family which has no male head due to the death of the husband. The village takes upon itself the responsibility of looking after the economic needs of this family in the absence of its bread-winner.

(2) The second share will be given to the temple, because the monks, who are engaged in looking after the spiritual needs of the village, cannot themselves engage in fishing, an activity prohibited by their code of discipline.

(3) The third share goes to the *gama-ra:la* or *vel-vida:ne*, the chief officer who handles matters relating to the tank and cultivation.

(4) The fourth share goes to other members of the village who have a specific, traditional occupation to do such as the village smith, who turns out the tools needed for agriculture.
(5) Finally, the common folk, who actually engaged themselves in fishing.



If there was a family whose husband could not take part in fishing due to ill-health, that family would also be looked after in the same way as the family without the husband.

The maintenance of the tank was also the common responsibility of the village. To keep the bund in good repair, every farmer had to gave a share of earth from his plot of land; the actual extent of the share varying according to the extent of land held. The cleaning of sluices was also done on a communal basis.

The ideology that prompted all the members of the tank village to share the rights, duties and obligations of the village was the idea that the tank, the village and the jungle beyond it are the common property of people.