

# Sri Lanka Village Life



Before the invention of synthetic rubber, natural rubber used to be one of the major cash crops for countries in South East Asia, Africa, and South America. In Sri Lanka it still is, thanks to improvements in growing methods and innovative marketing techniques. To see a line of rubber tappers, walking along a country road in the morning is still not a rare sight. Latex (the thick white sap of the rubber tree) is collected by cutting a helical groove in the bark of the tree using a specially designed knife. Care has to be taken to ensure that the cut is deep enough to extract the maximum amount of latex, yet without damaging the tree. Latex is usually collected in small tin cups attached to the bottom end of the groove. An experienced tapper can handle up to four hundred trees in a day. **Rubber Tapper**



The dry northern plains of Sri Lanka are blessed with ideal climate for growing many varieties of crops. The hot day-time temperatures and dry air make it specially suitable for vegetables like chilli (hot pepper) and onions. Looks like the owner of this small farm certainly had his share of good luck with his crop, looking at this red carpet of chilli peppers drying in the hot sun.

The small home in the background is made totally from locally available building materials. The adobe walls, and the roof made of woven coconut fronds bear witness to the ingenuity of the simple village folk. **Hot Peppers Drying in the Sun**



Favorite mode of transport of goods and people during the early part of the century, bullock carts survived the advent of machine age, and thank you very much, doing quite well even today. Still the least polluting, and with no burden on the natural resources, except perhaps for a bundle of hay every day, these wagons drawn by one or two bulls hold the romance of village life intact. In Sri Lanka, there is a whole facet of poetry (karattha kavi - poems of the cart) devoted to songs sung, and poems recited by the drivers of these carts, to keep awake during the lonely drives, for most part bullock carts were driven at night to avoid the heat of the day. **Bullock Cart**



How fresh do you like your Pathola, Karawila, Boanchi, and Brinjals (snake gourd, bitter melon, beans and egg plants) today? Like to pick it yourself straight from this small farmer's back yard? Due to a short-lived, but highly effective import embargo in the 70's of some essential products, including some food items, the average Sri Lankan turned to farming and even after the embargo was lifted kept his green thumbs intact and working hard. Now-a-days scenes like these, where villagers are selling common every day vegetables, like beans and egg plants and more exotic fruits like Mangosteen, Durian and Rambutan, are unavoidable for the visitor to the countryside. **From the Garden to the Table?**

This is a picture of a typical, *pola* - country market, that can be found anywhere in Sri Lanka. Although mom and pop groceries, and supermarkets are making strong inroads, the village *pola* still holds a nostalgic foothold





in the Sri Lankan life. Here, the busy house-wife on her way back home in the evening from her job in the office, can still get her fresh coconut for the evening meal, without having to stand in line to pay for it. And if you just don't happen to have the cash to pay for it today, it is alright too. Not to worry !. You will be there tomorrow too - it is almost a family affair!. **A Village Market**



Is another part of the *pola* - The forgotten art of weaving?. Well not quite. This old craftsman certainly seems to have a lot of fun doing what he is good at. And who wouldn't?. Imagine all the pretty young things in their swim suits, coming to him on their way to beach, for sun hats. Some of these hats are made out of fresh young palm fronds and they last only the day. Talking about a good customer base !.

Some of the larger markets are a jumble of sights, smells and sounds, and well worth a visit. At the *polas* (markets) bargaining or haggling is almost expected of the buyer and if you are good at it you 'll walk away feeling that you got a good bargain - or did you really ?. **Sun Hats for Sale !!**



For most Sri Lankans like many other foreigners, living away from home, the most frequently asked question seems to be " Where are you from ?". If the obvious answer is given, many-a-times the reaction is "Ah, Ceylon - where the tea comes from". Of course many of us go to the trouble of explaining, that the name now is Sri Lanka. Small incidents like this shows how closely tea is tied to Sri Lanka.

Tea, introduced to Sri Lanka (then Ceylon) by the British in 1849, is still one of the main export products. Today tea is grown in three distinct elevation levels. Low-grown from sea level to 2,000 feet, Mid-grown from 2,000 to 4,000 feet, and high-grown 4,000 feet and higher. Teas grown in various part of the country have their own distinctive flavors and aromas, somewhat analogous to vine grapes. An expert tea taster, like a good vine taster, can differentiate between teas from different regions, and even between different estates in the same region. **A Tea Estate in the Hill Country**



Picking tea leaves for processing is an exacting job. For the best quality tea, only the un-opened bud and the two tender leaves immediately below are used. When the British first started growing tea in Sri Lanka, they imported Tamil workers from southern India for this critical job, and the descendants of these workers, generally known as "Estate Tamils", because they live and work in the tea estates, are still the best tea pickers. An experienced tea picker uses both hands to pick and can throw handfuls of tea leaves over the shoulder to a cane basket hanging on her back without losing a single bud. Scenes like these, pretty ladies in brightly colored *saris* are everywhere in the tea growing areas.

In a country like Sri Lanka, next to elephant, the (Asian) buffalo is the most useful beast of burden. In the narrow, muddy, terraced, paddy (rice) fields, where modern tractors get bogged down in no time, the buffalo with a good keeper can do wonders. It can turn on a dime, (or perhaps a *cent*) doesn't use any natural resources, and needs no periodic maintenance. The buffalo provide us with milk, leather, and a good supply of fertilizer





too. In this scene the farmer is turning over the paddy field with a buffalo drawn plow, prior to transplanting young rice seedlings.

### Getting the Field Ready ...

Once the field is plowed and prepared for rice seedlings the ladies of the village take over. It is their job to do the back-breaking job of planting the individual seedlings, about 7 inches apart, in nice neat rows. Although sowing rice in the prepared field, instead of planting seedlings like this is easier and faster, it is believed that this process provides a better crop. And of course this calls for some entertainment, and the ladies provide it themselves, sometimes in the form of singing contests between groups of women working in adjoining fields. Just like the poems and songs associated with the bullock cart (driving) there are songs and poems (*nelun kavi*) associated with planting rice seedlings. Traditionally, these song tell tories

from the life of Buddha, while *karattha kavi* tends to be more like a commentary on the hard life of the bullock cart driver. **Transplanting Rice Seedlings**



It is believed that no part, except for the root ball, of the coconut tree is unused. Starting from the bottom, the steel-like wood from the trunk makes unique and long-lasting furniture. The fruit, when young, provides a fresh drink somewhat akin to champagne when chilled, and a potent drink (*ra*) when fermented over-night. Distilled, this makes *arak*, the local equivalent of whiskey. The fresh fruit provides coconut milk for cooking, and the shell, charcoal. In the villages where throwaway paper cups are unheard of, a cleaned coconut shell makes temporary cup for that all important cup of tea.

The woven leaves, make ideal thatching for the roof, for it allows for the (cooking) smoke etc. to escape while keeping the heaviest of downpours at bay. The items shown here is a small sample of the many products that are manufactured from coconut fiber (*coir*) **Doormats for Sale ..**



A typical morning scene on the Western and Southern coasts. Fishing is still done mostly by *oruwa* canoe-like out-rigger boats like these, but now small motorized boats are beginning to replace these ancient crafts. People in Sri Lanka have been using *oruwas* like these for centuries and the evolution goes back to pre-historic times.

The days catch like, tuna and seer, crabs and prawns (shrimp) are sold right off the boat at the beach, to the highest bidder, with one small caveat. Haggling with the fishermen for the price of fish could be harmful to your well being !! - they are notoriously short tempered,

and Oh !! the language if you cross them !! . **Looking for a Fresh Catch?**

Fishing boats on the shores of Koddiiyar Bay, just south of [Trincomalee](#), near the town of Muttur. Fishing boats like these, called *oruwa* in Sinhala, have been plying the oceans around Sri Lanka for generations. *Oruwa* a small boat with a single sail in the center, is capable of sailing forwards or backwards with a simple change to the sail. Totally dependant on the wind, these boats are amazingly safe and reliable. Although now slowly being replaced by motorized boats due to economic reasons, these boats are still the mainstay of the fishermen.

### Fishing Boats



Sri Lankan waters are blessed with an ample supply of sea life. During certain times of the year small fish like sardines, and anchovies are abundant in some of the shallow lagoons, and one can scoop them up with these small nets. It certainly beats sitting at the waters edge with a rod and reel !!

### **Net Fishing**



Religion plays a strong part in Sri Lankan's daily life. If you are brought up with a strong religious background, it is not uncommon for you to make a quick stop over at the local temple, perhaps on your way to work in the morning. If you are a Buddhist, or a Hindu, you will also have some fresh flowers from the garden with you, as offerings. Here is one young lady doing her part to keep up that tradition. What looks like a poor persons' clothes line around her are small pennants left there by various visitors to this shrine, as a reminder of a promise made to a powerful deity who has a strong presence here, in exchange for the deity taking special care of one's son or daughter who might be going overseas. Or they might be from devotees who are looking for some divine help, for relatives who may be seriously ill. Once the crisis is over, preferably with expected good results, the promise will be fulfilled and the pennant taken down.

### **Early Morning Visit to the Temple**



If you have ever been in the central highlands of Sri Lanka, this is a scene that you will see repeated all over. A small trail, up in the hills, with morning mist rising in the valley around you, the lush greenery wet with condensing dew from the cool night - The local small trader (watti amma - an endearing term used to describe door-to-door produce saleswomen) making her way to the local pola (farm market), her woven basket filled with fresh picked vegetables and fruit balanced on her head - If you listen very carefully, you have to listen very carefully, for there are other distracting sounds, like the bubbling of water in a nearby brook, or the various nestlings waking up to the rising sun and

crying out for the first bite of the day, you just might be able to hear the gentle laughter of children on their way to school. **Up in the Hills:**