



Indigenous Communities in Sri Lanka

The Veddahs





Declaration of Our Core Commitment to Sustainability

Dilmah owes its success to the quality of Ceylon Tea. Our business was founded therefore on an enduring connection to the land and the communities in which we operate. We have pioneered a comprehensive commitment to minimising our impact on the planet, fostering respect for the environment and ensuring its protection by encouraging a harmonious coexistence of man and nature. We believe that conservation is ultimately about people and the future of the human race, that efforts in conservation have associated human well-being and poverty reduction outcomes. These core values allow us to meet and exceed our customers' expectations of sustainability.

Our Commitment

We reinforce our commitment to the principle of making business a matter of human service and to the core values of Dilmah, which are embodied in the Six Pillars of Dilmah.

We will strive to conduct our activities in accordance with the highest standards of corporate best practice and in compliance with all applicable local and international regulatory requirements and conventions.

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We promote good relationships with all communities of which we are a part and we commit to enhance their quality of life and opportunities whilst respecting their culture, way of life and heritage.



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This publication is not a complete study on the indigenous communities in Sri Lanka and contains some of the information gathered during the course of the Veddah Community Upliftment programme carried out by Dilmah Conservation. Additional emphasis has been given to research carried out on the coastal Veddah community.

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An introduction

In the same way that the evolution of man since the stone age defines us in this 21st Century, understanding ancient tribes and their cultural, social, economic and scientific heritage has indisputable relevance in the present time. The symbiotic relationship that many of Sri Lanka's ancient tribes had with nature offers invaluable lessons for example, in sustainability. The architecture, medicine, nutrition, agriculture, irrigation systems and many other aspects of the traditional communities of Sri Lanka feature technologies that have been perfected over generations and which are important to science even today.

Dilmah Conservation began its investigation into the indigenous communities of Sri Lanka with two objectives. First to attempt to ease the dislocation that many of these communities suffer as a result of the irrelevance of their skills in the 21st Century. In seeking to do so, we have made every effort to understand and respect the cultural, social and historic context of each of the communities that Dilmah Conservation has engaged with, in order to nurture the identity of each as we assist them in redefining their role in society.

Secondly, we have sought to address the dearth of serious investigation and documentation of the remarkable heritage of the many indigenous communities in Sri Lanka. As the rapidly changing social context disrupts the tradition of orally passing historical tales from generation to generation, we have sought to document any that could be recorded for the benefit of future generations. The purpose here is not solely for historical record but equally that future generations of these communities might take pride in their heritage and also benefit from it.

The Culture and Indigenous Communities Programme of Dilmah Conservation has a socio-economic dimension which seeks to assist the communities in exploring opportunities in indigenous tourism, traditional art and craft as a means of empowering themselves with dignity. I invite you to join Dilmah Conservation in its endeavour. As you read this publication please remember that the traditions that are recorded here are in most cases deeply meaningful and form important elements in the complex social, cultural, environmental, historical, political and economic definition of a Sri Lankan in the 21st Century.



Merrill J. Fernando
Founder – Dilmah Conservation



Merrill J. Fernandez

Foreword

The Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the Accelerated Mahaweli Development Project which commenced in 1981 required that the catchments of Maduru Oya and Ulhitiya be declared as a protected area for elephant conservation and catchment purposes. The prevailing legislations in the country were scanned for the most appropriate manner to achieve this and it clearly showed that the required protection could only be guaranteed through the provisions of the Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance (FFPO) through the declaration of a National Park. Thus a decision was taken to declare this area as a National Park (NP). This was only the beginning of a saga that was to continue in the decades to come.

A national park declared under the FFPO however does not allow for private property and human habitation within its precincts. Thus the fate of the 'Veddah community' who had lived within these areas for generations was decided. Some of us in the wildlife EIA team felt that they should be integrated into the wildlife sector but the authorities with decision making powers felt otherwise. The question of "should not they become part of the mainstream?" was posed and answered. The decision was taken - the community must leave to Henanegala. The leader of the community, Thissahamy, his family and seven other families decided to stay on despite the violation of the rules of the FFPO. Thus began the new chapter of the Veddah community. They have been studied, been in the limelight in the past as this documentation indicate.

As time passed Thissahamy continued with the assistance of Wanniya (his son) to seek due recognition for his clan. The passing away of Thissahamy resulted in Wanniya taking over the reign. Wanniya is a strong, tactful, sharp character compared to his father. With his determination, Wanniya was able to bring old traditions back into the mainstream. The 'Vanniyalaththo - people of the forest' as they call themselves (the most appropriate) and not Veddahs any more, are today more recognised as an indigenous community in Sri Lanka than ever before. The cultural centre at Dambana is up and running. The government has pledged at various times to uplift the community needs.

Despite the pledges made by many, the Vanniyalaththo has been somewhat overlooked too. It is partly this situation that resulted in Dilmah Conservation involving itself to help the Vanniyalaththo or the indigenous people of this country. There is much to save in their culture in the changing world. They were affected heavily by 'transformations' brought about by the dominated

cultures in the process of 'regularisation'. The 30 year-conflict affected them severely, as they were caught between the two conflicting parties. The distinct 'coastal Veddhas' in the East were very much affected this way. In the past few years, a distinct revival or 'recognition' is evident through the establishment of the 'Varigasabha', 'inventorisation of villages and distribution', etc. These have been facilitated by Dilmah Conservation, and recognised and fostered by the State whenever possible.

The 'evicted' Veddah people have now been recognised. They have been permitted entry to the National Parks and have also been recruited as 'Guides'. Progressive integration of this nature helps sustain the identity of the community.

While all these are enabling better recognition of the people and their traditions, modern development trends are taking its toll too. Exposure to modernisation would inevitably result in change. It would also be unacceptable to profess that they should not be benefiting from the new technologies - television, cellular phones, education, etc.

The Vanniyalaththo are at a major crossroad in their history. It should remind us in the so-called 'mainstream' to ask the question "when do we recognise them as a distinct group of persons?" (as indigenous people). Do we do this on their 'biological traits' or 'their culture?' Which do we want to preserve? The answer will lead to a critical decision that may by itself violate free choice and humanity.

This publication and the studies are thus very timely. The Vanniyalaththo are no longer just a small group confined to the areas of Dambana, Rathugala, etc. They are spread over 75 villages extending widely in the eastern part of the country. They have diverse 'habits' acquired due to their interaction with the 'modern'. They now have within themselves to discipline the 'tradition' from the 'acquired' to take forth the true customs to the future.

Professor Sarath W. Kotagama
*Professor of Environmental Science, Bird Ecology and Behaviour,
Conservation Biology and Ecotourism and
Former Director of Wildlife Conservation*



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Uruvarige Vanniyalathibo, leader of the Veddah community

The song of our heritage

The anthem of the Veddah people

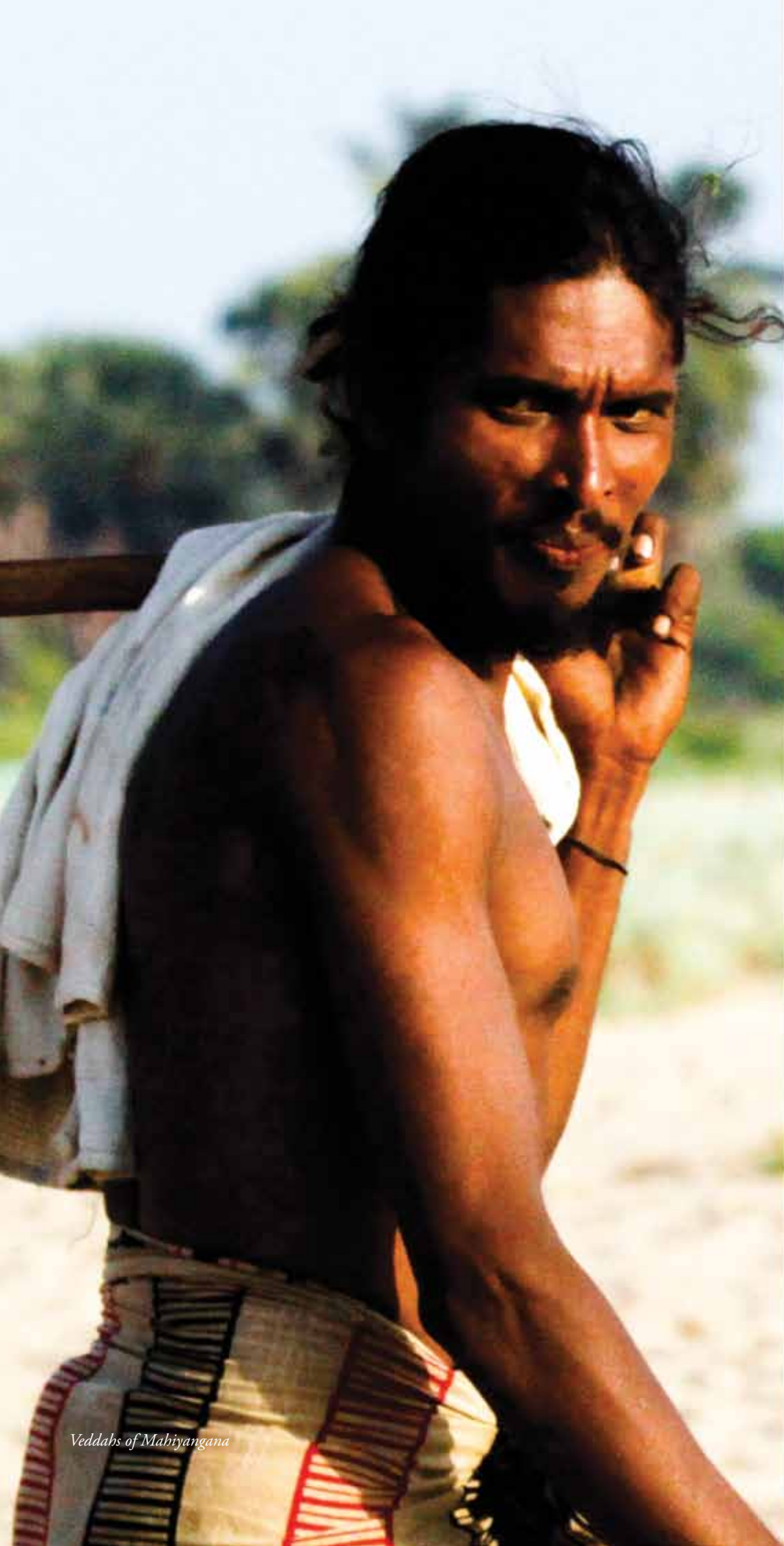
Everything that is natural- god given,
the sun, the moon, the wind, the trees
and the beauty of the blowing wind, the wild animal
who is a part of nature itself belongs to us the Vanniyalaththo
the men of the jungle

For eternity,
to the day that the sun and the moon exist
we will belong to the yakka tribe

Our forearms possess the strength of a steady rock
our minds are filled with beauty
that can be compared to the serenity of the jungle
our hearts contain the rhythm of the running water
we are the men of the jungle.

*Yakka is one of the two tribes that are said to have inhabited the country at the time when
Prince Vijeya landed somewhere between 5th and 6th century BC.

*(The Veddah anthem was composed by Dambane Gunewardena,
who has the distinction of being the first indigenous person to have gained entrance to a university in Sri Lanka)*





Origin and evolution of the Veddah

‘Every part of this soil is sacred in the estimation of my people. Every hillside, every valley, every plain and grove, has been hallowed by some sad or happy event in days long vanished. Even the rocks, which seem to be dumb and dead as the swelter in the sun along the silent shore, thrill with memories of stirring events connected with the lives of my people, and the very dust upon which you now stand responds more lovingly to their footsteps than yours, because it is rich with the blood of our ancestors, and our bare feet are conscious of the sympathetic touch.’

Our departed braves, fond mothers, glad, happy hearted maidens, and even the little children who lived here and rejoiced here for a brief season, will love these sombre solitudes and at eventide they greet shadowy returning spirits’, Chief Seattle the leader of the Red Indians said as far back as 1854.

These words hold true to this day. The indigenous community of any land would share these very thoughts that Chief Seattle intended to share in the face of colonisation and integration. It is in the face of the very threat of integration that today, we fear the loss and recognise the uniqueness of our very own ‘Fathers of the Land’ - the Veddahs of Sri Lanka.

The term ‘Veddah’ finds its roots from the Sanskrit word ‘Vyadha’. The meaning of which is hunter with a bow and arrow. The pure Veddahs, unlike the Sinhalese who speak an Indo-Aryan language and claim Aryan descent, are related to the Austro-Asiatic people found scattered today in many parts of southern Asia.

They are also referred to as ‘Vanniyalththo’ or forest dwellers. This word is often misinterpreted to represent a name of a single individual or a tribe amongst the Veddahs, but there is solid reason to believe, that the term was coined due to the very fact that the members of the indigenous community of Sri Lanka, were and still are in actual fact, forest dwellers. Living within the beauty of nature, finding their salvation, their livelihood, their love, affection and continuation within the realms of Mother Nature. As Kahlil

Gibran would say to them ‘The sun is the mother of the earth and gives it its nourishment of heat; it never leaves the universe at night until it has put the earth to sleep to the song of the sea and the hymn of the birds and brooks. And this earth is the mother of trees and flowers. It produces them, nurses them, and weans them. The trees and flowers become kind mothers to their great fruits and seeds. And the mother, the prototype of all existence, is the eternal spirit, full of beauty and love.’

The Veddahs of Sri Lanka, descend from a direct line of Sri Lanka’s Neolithic community. It is estimated that their origins lie as far back as 16,000 BC. However, according to modern scientific research, there is strong opinion to believe that since 125,000 BC there were settlements and civilisations within Sri Lanka. The lineage of the current Veddahs however, could be ascertained to the era between 18,000 BC and 15,000 BC.

The Mahawamsa, the main chronicle that recorded the history of this nation however opines otherwise. According to it, the Veddah lineage is directly connected to the father of the Sinhala race, Vijaya. Prince Vijaya (5 BC - 6 BC) who later went on to become the first king of Sri Lanka, met Kuveni on the shores of ‘Thambapanni’. Kuveni was the queen of the Yakkas, one of the two tribes, the other being the Nagas that had settlements in Sri Lanka. Vijaya, fell in love with the queen and they had two children, a girl and a boy. The marriage was short-lived, as Vijaya, by then king of the island, left Kuveni for a Pandyan princess. The children had then, according to the chronicle, departed to the valleys of the Ratnapura District where they had multiplied giving rise to the Veddahs of today. There is strong academic opinion in favour of the above narration and anthropologists such as Seligmann as far back as, 1911 believed that there were similarities between the genetics of the Yakkas and modern day Veddahs.

Nandadeva Wijesekera, author of *Veddahs in Transition* (1964), believes that the word Sabaragamuwa, the province in which the Ratnapura District is situated is derived from the dwelling of the Veddahs. ‘Sabaras’ is interpreted as ‘forest

Uru Varige Thissahamy, late leader of the Veddah community and father of the present leader, is credited as the person who spearheaded Veddah revival in Sri Lanka

dwellers', akin to the Vanniyalaththo. Many places situated in the environs of the District to this day bear names such as 'Vedhi Gala', 'Vedha Ala', and 'Vedi Kanda', bearing testimony to this school of academic opinion.

Dr. S.V. Deraniyagala, former Director General of Archaeology in Sri Lanka however goes a step further. He points out in his research work titled *The early man and the rise of civilization in Sri Lanka: Archaeological evidence* (1992) that the genetic continuum from at least 18,000 BC at Batadombalena to Belilena at 16,000 BC and to the Bellan Bandi Palassa at 6,500 BC connects to the modern Veddah population. He opines that in actual fact, the Veddahs could find a common ancestor in the form of the 'Balangoda man'. All these sites where human remains have been found were subject to detailed scientific study. They are considered to yield the earliest evidence of the anatomically modern man in South Asia. 'These anatomically modern prehistoric humans in Sri Lanka are referred to as Balangoda Man in popular parlance (derived from his being responsible for the Mesolithic 'Balangoda Culture' first defined in sites near Balangoda). He stood at an estimated height of 174 cm for males and 166 cm for females in certain samples, which is considerably higher when compared with the genetics of the present-day population in Sri Lanka. The bones are robust, with thick skull-bones, prominent brow-ridges, depressed wide noses, heavy jaws and short necks. The teeth are conspicuously large. These traits have survived in varying degrees among the Veddahs and certain Sinhalese groups, thus pointing to Balangoda Man as being the common ancestor.'

Within the course of their evolution, the original community spread across the country setting up home in rural parts of the Island. Dambana, is considered the capital of the Veddah community and some folk moved and integrated with society in areas in North Central and Uva Provinces.



“ Though much of their original practices and grandeur have been compromised to this day, many find their distinct culture and practices fascinating ”

There is also a distinct line of these indigenous inhabitants found within the east coast of Sri Lanka. Though much of their original practices and grandeur have been compromised to this day, many find their distinct culture and practices fascinating.

The Veddah lifestyle is intertwined with forest ecology. The restrictions that have been put forth internally due to the scarcity of resources and their nomadic lifestyle have influenced the tribes being split into small groups. Each group comprises a nuclear family or a few extended families. These clans dwell within clearly demarcated boundaries and territories. This very fact has tacitly played a pivotal role in forming a unique but sustainable lifestyle for these 'forest dwellers'. The nature of hunting, gathering of rations, chena cultivation and the size of the individual group, have direct bearing to the division of labour among each individual group. The Veddahs seldom have individual belongings; this in turn facilitates their mobility and harnesses their freedom. Thus inevitably, some clans hold distinct advantage due to the fact that the clans that have settled down have access to more natural resources and good hunting grounds.

The ritual structure of the Veddah society, also finds its bearings from nature itself. The affiliations of clans, tribes and the Veddah community as a whole, have towards the transcendental, in which they believe they are being looked after by some spirit who is a relative, animal or plant, the worship of trees and rocks, which are located at some strategic location important to the clan, charms and songs that are meant to invoke blessings, and the ritualistic veneration of the supernatural at the beginning and end of cultivation, points towards the Veddah's distinct relationship with forest ecology itself.

Despite colonisation and resettlements of Veddahs, the chieftains have remained strong in their resolve; Varige Wanniya, the chieftain of the Veddahs addressing the United Nations working group on Indigenous people in 1996 was very clear 'We want to survive not only as a people but also as a culture', he said. This was in the backdrop of the Maduru Oya reserve being taken out of the hands of the Veddahs and the criminality that was prescribed to the killing of beasts and the shredding of forests. 'Our relationship with our environment is changing. We were the custodians of the jungle throughout the generations. Now the jungle is no longer ours and we do not feel responsible for its maintenance. A 'grab and run' philosophy has developed. We sneak inside, kill what we can get and then run outside again. We would not do that before. We were taught not to kill an animal drinking water, because we all need to drink water. We would not kill a pregnant mother; a deer, a sambhur or any other pregnant animal. We would not kill a four-legged mother giving milk to her young ones. The very land we, the Vanniyaalaththo, shared with other beings (aththo) is also shared by our ancestral forefathers, gods and goddesses and forest spirits. We are now alienated from them.'

This underscores the threat that modern civilisation presents to the indigenous community. They have been dwindling in numbers due to integration with the Sinhalese and Tamil community and to make matters worse, there is the issue of direct governmental intervention either by way of law or by way of resettlements.



Veddah community in the east

The Veddah community in the east, often referred to as 'Muhudu Veddah' or 'Veddahs of the sea', reside mainly in the Districts of Trincomalee and Batticaloa. Despite being intrinsically connected to the 'original inhabitants of the land', this community bears very little resemblance to the original Veddahs. The word Veddah is often associated with a bare chested man, carrying a weapon on his shoulder with his hair tied behind his head. This generalised description does not fit the present day Veddahs of the east. They seldom bare resemblance to the prototype of the indigenous Lankan.

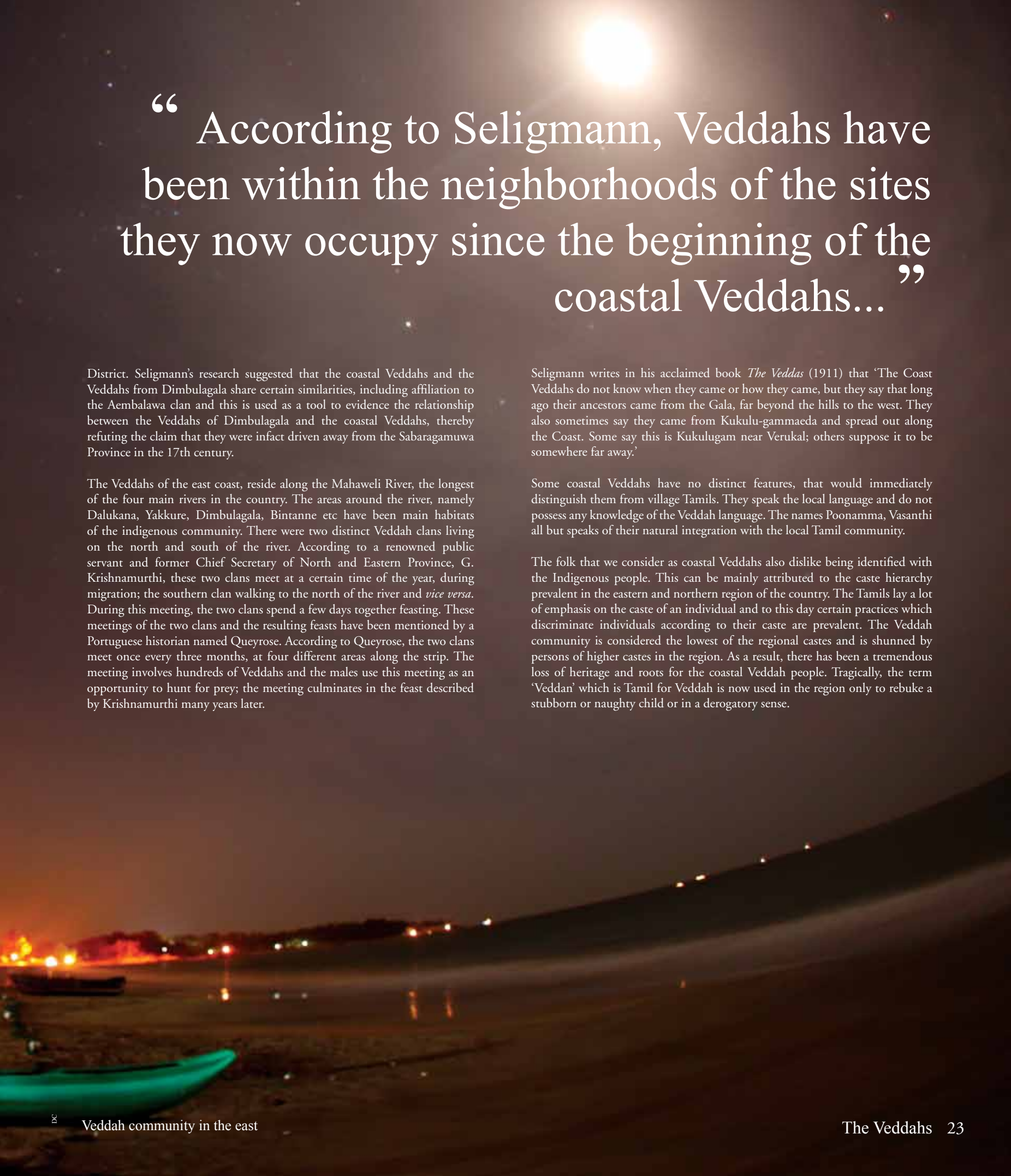
The remake of the Veddah in the eastern part of the island can be attributed to the socio-political reinvigoration that has swept across the country. Many of the Veddahs have married into native Tamil families and thereon have evolved into the normal way of life of the community.

The only recognition of the eastern Veddah, as being distinctly indigenous, is a purely theoretical one. The United Nations definition on what an indigenous population is, was first formulated in 1972 and was subject to amendments. The original definition reads 'Indigenous populations are composed of the existing descendants of the peoples who inhabited the present territory of a country wholly or partially at the time when persons of a different culture or ethnic origin arrived there from other parts of the world, overcame them, by conquest, settlement or other means, reduced them to

a non-dominant or colonial condition; who today live more in conformity with their particular social, economic and cultural customs and traditions than with the institutions of the country of which they now form part, under a state structure which incorporates mainly national, social and cultural characteristics of other segments of the population which are predominant.'

Thus the Veddahs of the east would find themselves within the parameters of the above definition. The date of their first arrival on the coast and of their subsequent inter-marriage with Tamils is uncertain. According to Seligmann, Veddahs have been within the neighborhoods of the sites they now occupy since the beginning of the coastal Veddahs, but the Veddahs themselves have a belief that they migrated from the inlands. Robert Knox does not mention them, but Hugh Neville considers that they came from Sabaragamuwa (Sufferagam), being driven from their native Sabaragamuwa during the 17th century.

There is strong academic opinion to refute Neville's claim. The older generation of Veddahs, despite not being able to give a clear date or place of their arrival in the coast, were of the opinion that their forefathers migrated to the east of the country from a place with the name of 'Gala' (stone). Taking the above into consideration, we can assume that these Veddahs migrated from either Dimbulagala or Nilgala, habitats situated close to the Batticaloa



“ According to Seligmann, Veddahs have been within the neighborhoods of the sites they now occupy since the beginning of the coastal Veddahs...”

District. Seligmann's research suggested that the coastal Veddahs and the Veddahs from Dimbulagala share certain similarities, including affiliation to the Aemalawa clan and this is used as a tool to evidence the relationship between the Veddahs of Dimbulagala and the coastal Veddahs, thereby refuting the claim that they were in fact driven away from the Sabaragamuwa Province in the 17th century.

The Veddahs of the east coast, reside along the Mahaweli River, the longest of the four main rivers in the country. The areas around the river, namely Dalukana, Yakkure, Dimbulagala, Bintanne etc have been main habitats of the indigenous community. There were two distinct Veddah clans living on the north and south of the river. According to a renowned public servant and former Chief Secretary of North and Eastern Province, G. Krishnamurthi, these two clans meet at a certain time of the year, during migration; the southern clan walking to the north of the river and *vice versa*. During this meeting, the two clans spend a few days together feasting. These meetings of the two clans and the resulting feasts have been mentioned by a Portuguese historian named Queyroze. According to Queyroze, the two clans meet once every three months, at four different areas along the strip. The meeting involves hundreds of Veddahs and the males use this meeting as an opportunity to hunt for prey; the meeting culminates in the feast described by Krishnamurthi many years later.

Seligmann writes in his acclaimed book *The Veddahs* (1911) that 'The Coast Veddahs do not know when they came or how they came, but they say that long ago their ancestors came from the Gala, far beyond the hills to the west. They also sometimes say they came from Kukulugammaeda and spread out along the Coast. Some say this is Kukulugam near Verukal; others suppose it to be somewhere far away.'

Some coastal Veddahs have no distinct features, that would immediately distinguish them from village Tamils. They speak the local language and do not possess any knowledge of the Veddah language. The names Poonamma, Vasanthi all but speak of their natural integration with the local Tamil community.

The folk that we consider as coastal Veddahs also dislike being identified with the Indigenous people. This can be mainly attributed to the caste hierarchy prevalent in the eastern and northern region of the country. The Tamils lay a lot of emphasis on the caste of an individual and to this day certain practices which discriminate individuals according to their caste are prevalent. The Veddah community is considered the lowest of the regional castes and is shunned by persons of higher castes in the region. As a result, there has been a tremendous loss of heritage and roots for the coastal Veddah people. Tragically, the term 'Veddah' which is Tamil for Veddah is now used in the region only to rebuke a stubborn or naughty child or in a derogatory sense.

When due recognition is given to empirical data it can be deduced that the origins of the coastal Veddahs can be traced back to the 13th and 14th centuries. During that period, ethnic Sinhalese dominated the dwellings of Batticaloa and Hugh Neville's research shows a presence of coastal Veddahs during that time. According to Neville, the coastal village of the modern day Akkaraipattu, had a Veddah chief by the name of Puliyan. He was hailed as the chief of seven Veddah villages and his village was named Puliyanthiwu. It is recorded that Batticaloa as a whole was named Puliyanthiwu bearing the name of the then Veddah chief.

Recorded history suggests that this Veddah chief was a man-servant, of a then powerful state official named Rajapakshe. He supplied him with constant offerings of traditional meat and honey and was considered to be loyal to the state official. Mudliyar Rajapakshe, as he was known was impressed with the benevolence with which he was regarded by the Veddah chief and ensured Puliyan's marriage to Kandi, a local Veddah girl. There is also mention of another Veddah chief by the name of Karadiyan. It is said that the duty of this chief and his clan was to help with the construction of buildings in the area. There is also evidence to suggest that the Veddahs in the area were involved with the growing of paddy and other agriculture related industries. Hugh Neville's discovery, the Nadukadu Record goes on to state that when Mudliyar Rajapakshe visits Batticaloa, he brings with him two Veddahs akin to modern day bodyguards. The reason was his fear of attack from another Veddah clan, which resided in an area then known as Palwekam. There is also a record of the visit of King Senarath to the eastern coast. During this visit it is said that the Vegoda Veddah clan played the role of 'obedient servant' to the king. There is good reason to believe that the Vegoda Veddah clan and the clan that resided in Palwekam, according to Hugh Neville, are one and the same.

During the Dutch rule of the Island (1658-1798), Francois Valentine prepared a map of Ceylon in the year 1726. The map titled 'New Katt Van Het Eyland Ceylan', consisted of an area in the east coast reaching up to modern day Mulaithivu, demarcated as coastal Veddah territory. It can be safely assumed that there must have been a considerable presence of coastal

Veddahs in the area, so much so, that the Dutch simply could not ignore their presence and were compelled to include it in their maps of the Island. But then, there arises the pertinent question as to what exactly happened to these indigenous clans? The only justifiable assumption is that these clans integrated into normal civilisation and evolved therein, leaving no trace of their ancestral roots except in the rarest of cases - the apparent similarity in their genes. There are certain records of the Dutch using these Veddahs as soldiers and slaves. Governor Ryckloff Van Goen's notes are instructive in this regard.

Seligmann's *The Veddahs*, states that the coastal Veddah settlement was limited to the north of Batticaloa. However, he points out that there is reason to believe that prior to the dawn of the 20th century, the Veddah settlements in the east extended towards the south of Batticaloa. Seligmann goes on to describe 'The Coast Veddahs are expert fishermen and make use of various forms of nets including a cast net. They also spear and shoot fish, using a bifid iron spear-head, which they have adopted from the Tamils. For shooting fish, they use the usual Veddah bow, but the arrow has become a harpoon with a shaft as long as the bow into which the iron with its running line fits loosely'.

The census carried out by the Sri Lankan state can be used as a tool albeit its deficiencies in ascertaining the growth or decline of the coastal Veddahs. The census carried out in 1921 shows that the Veddah population in the Central Province at 458 and the total number of coastal Veddahs in and around the Batticaloa District at 2489, the coastal Veddahs from the Trincomalee District was recorded as 707 and Mullaitivu accounted for 43 individual members of the indigenous community. What is clear from this census is that, despite heavy attention laid on the Veddahs residing in the middle of the country, the population living on the border outnumbers them.

The census carried out in 1946, records a decline in the number of Veddahs who had made Badulla their habitat; the recorded figure being 351. This decline was common to the coastal Veddahs alike with 1866 Veddahs recorded from Batticaloa.

“ The coastal Veddahs are expert fishermen and make use of various forms of nets including a cast net ”







However, the 1953 census reveals values that would shock any statistician or historian alike. The census revealed an increase in the Veddahs of Badulla to 361 and the number accounted for from the coastal belt stood at an alarming 33. This number did not include the Veddahs of Trincomalee. However, scholars as Prof Nandadeva Wijesekera were of the opinion that the number 33 accounted for in the Batticaloa District, included the Veddahs of Trincomalee as well.

Many have attributed the reason for this sharp decline as being due to the integration between the indigenous Veddahs and the native Tamil community. However, there is also strong evidence to suggest that political clouding influenced the officials who were involved in the census with the authorities of the area insisting that the Veddahs be listed as regular Tamils. Yuvaraj Thangarajah, in his research paper was of the opinion that the nationality of the coastal Veddahs was decided at the sole discretion of the Tamil officials at the time and it was believed that they tampered with the original number in order to gain political mileage. Irrespective of the reason that has been attributed to the decline, what is clear is that one of the most reliable tools that is used in the gathering of data has been tampered with and the result was the fact that there was no clear number ascribed to these coastal Veddahs. This inevitably has not helped the cause of the Veddahs or researches and has rendered grave injustice to the community considered as the 'fathers' of this land.

Despite the inaccuracies and deficiencies of the census, what can be acknowledged is that Veddahs of Batticaloa have had some sort of record. However, the same cannot be said of the coastal Veddahs of Trincomalee. The records of Veddahs residing in the Trincomalee District have been scarce and more often than not unhelpful. According to Krishnamurthi, the coastal town of Verugal had a strong relationship to the indigenous community. Later, the name was changed to reflect the ethnic Tamil dominance in the area to Ichchalanpaththu.

According to Parasuraman, a politician affiliated to the United National Party and a member of the Eastern Provincial Council, the Veddahs of Ichchalanpaththu, consists of Veddahs from adjoining towns. He says that these Veddahs have

integrated with normal civilisation and today the town is considered to be one of the most developed towns in the area. He asserts that the local Veddahs have integrated with the 'Sindunadu Vellalar' farmers who were brought down from India for cultivation by the Dutch. These farmers have grown in population and today play a decisive role in the political outcome of the District.

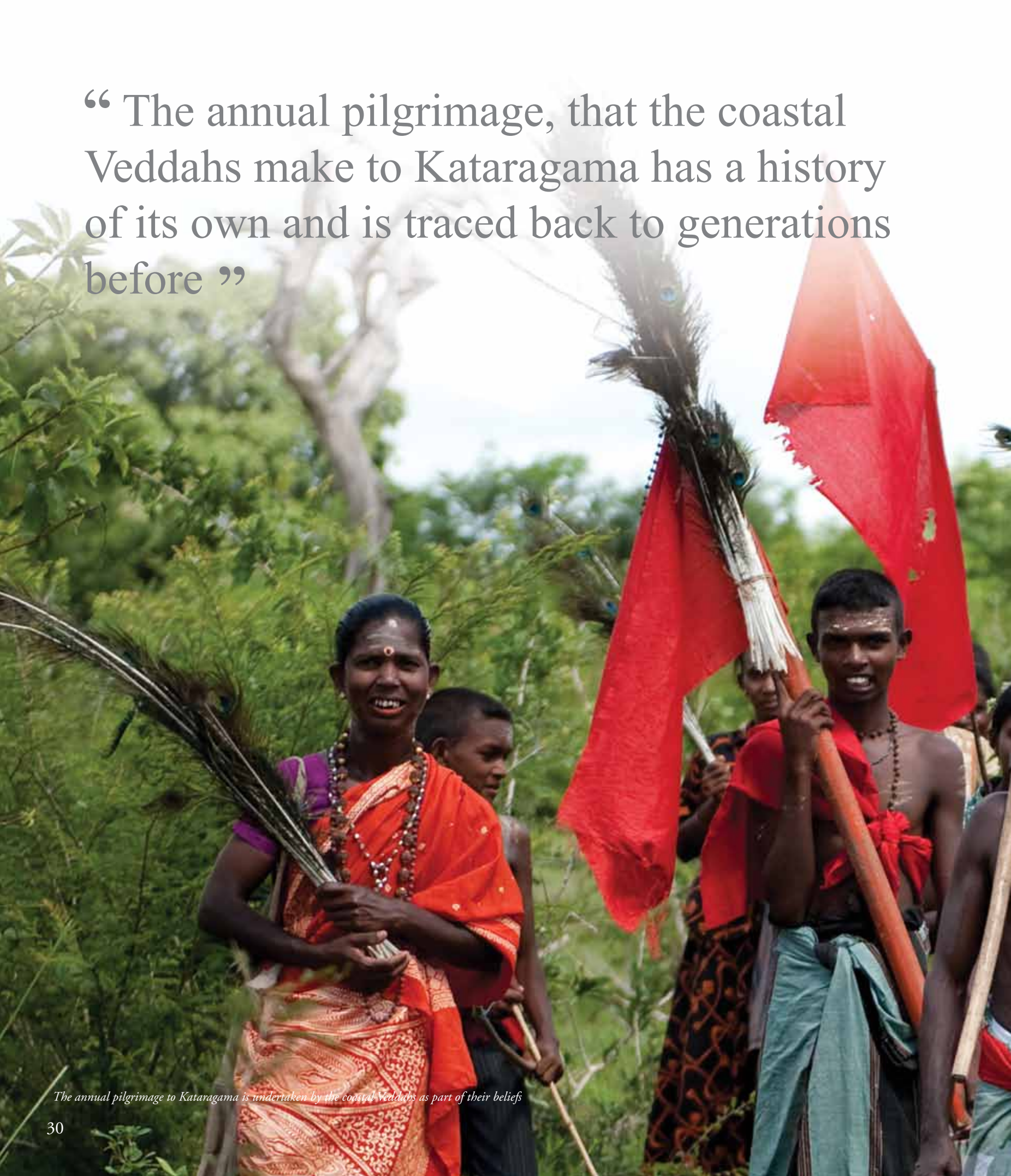
A chance meeting

The recent unearthing of an inherent link between Tamils and Buddhism, with substantial evidence being provided as to the link between Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, intertwined with the philosophy of the Buddha; an archeological upheaval of sorts has been the subsequent result. There can be no more substantive evidence to this cohesive fusion between the language and culture than the very fact that to this day Tamil speaking Veddahs in this country are a reality. As astonishing as it may sound, our research into the inner workings of the Veddahs proved to be a journey between the timelines of history and culture that has had a direct bearing on Sri Lanka as it is today.

Our meeting of Tamil speaking Veddahs came by chance, during our journey to Kataragama - the sacred shrine where for centuries if not a millennia, throngs people from all parts of the globe, irrespective of their race, religion, creed or caste to pay homage. Lord Kataragama has a history that is equally mind wrenching as it is with the Veddahs, a story that cannot be confined to within this book. However, Lord Kataragama has attracted and to this day still attract many of the original 'first citizens' of this country, for divine blessings. That being said, our meeting with the Tamil speaking Veddahs was coincidental. During the journey we witnessed that there was a section of people who kept a visible distance from the usual Tamil speaking pilgrims. We asked a few Tamil speaking pilgrims as to the reason for this distance and it was only then that we discovered, much to our delight and astonishment, that they were in fact coastal Veddahs.



“ The annual pilgrimage, that the coastal Veddahs make to Kataragama has a history of its own and is traced back to generations before ”



The annual pilgrimage to Kataragama is undertaken by the coastal Veddahs as part of their beliefs



“ They are also referred to as ‘Palaya aalkal’ or ancient people, a term ethnic Tamils fall back to when referring to a Veddah ”

The academics who have written widely and quite extensively on the Veddahs of Sri Lanka have often not found space to mention the existence of coastal Veddahs. A recent publication that in fact mentioned the existence of these coastal Veddahs stated that this community has been under the total control of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) and thus any coherent factor about them was not to be found.

We also were made aware that the leader of this community was among the group of coastal Veddahs who had undertaken the annual pilgrimage. The leader of the clan - Thiruchelvam, much to our surprise was a youth of around seventeen or eighteen years of age. As is normal within aboriginal communities, he had inherited the leadership of the clan at the death of his grandfather, the former leader of the community. His grandfather Kandan's last wish had been to bestow the leadership of the clan to his grandson. However Thiruchelvam had a completely different view on the existence of Tamil speaking coastal Veddahs. 'Although today most of us are Tamil, we were Sinhalese three or four generations before' he said.

According to Thiruchelvam's tracing of history, the English, the former colonial masters, had created settlements for seven Sinhala Veddah families. They were given land along the coastal belt reaching Trincomalee on one side and Batticaloa on the other. The seven families were thus resettled in areas such as Mundalam, Veeramanagar, Vattalipuram, Uppural, Illangathurai, Moththiwaram and Nallur. These families had previously been residents of a place named Palivena situated within the precincts of Batticaloa.

With the resettlement, the ensuing generations of the community had become accustomed to the Tamil communities' way of life. Thus Thiruchelvam's argument stems in the age old debate of nature against nurture. His beliefs and puts forth facts to substantiate that it was 'nurturing' that subsequently created a Tamil speaking coastal Veddah community.

Today, the surroundings of Muththur and Thopur have fifteen villages which consist of a predominantly Tamil speaking Veddah population. According to Thiruchelvam, Kallady, Mankarni, Kadiraweli, Poddichenei, Nayangani, and other small habitats in and around Batticaloa comprise of more than ten thousand members of his clan. In addition, villages such as Thiriyaya, Kuchchaveli, and Jaffna also have a considerable population of Tamil speaking coastal Veddahs.

Thiruchelvam tells us that his relatives can be found in the heartland of the Veddah community in the country. 'The Veddahs in the Dambane, Nilgala jungle are also our people, but we don't have any connections today' he laments.

The coastal Veddahs tell us that their ancestors found divinity in the dead (Uththi Akkal); this phenomenon is common among almost all the Veddahs spanning the length and breadth of the country. However, today's coastal Veddahs seem to have a sophisticated belief system in comparison to their lineage with many opting to the worship of the Hindu gods. In addition to the Hindu gods, the community also pays homage to deities such as Kunchi Mahappa, Meehachci Amman, Paimaththu Thevungal, Kanthimar and Aandiyam whom they consider gods in charge of the seas.

The ancestors of the current community were prototypes of a Veddah hunting with the bow and arrow and other traditional weapons. However today's coastal Veddahs tell us that they do not possess the skill to hunt with traditional weapons. 'We have the bows and arrows that our forefathers used, but we keep them in reverence, and pay homage to them'.

Despite the non use of traditional arms, the Veddahs don't seem to have forgotten their ancestral profession, hunting albeit in a modern form. 'We have hunter dogs, and we use them to hunt animals such as monitors and rabbit. Once in a while we use them to chase and hunt wild boar and use our spears to kill them once they are hunted down'.

A majority of coastal Veddahs earn a living by doing various jobs. Some of them told us that since they don't have any paddy land they don't have the luxury to cultivate. 'Since we don't have land to cultivate on, all we can do is play the part of a helper in some paddy field' they say.

As much as they have forgotten the distinct and unique language that had been part and parcel of the Veddah, the names of the members of this community have also been lost in the slow transition with the environment in which they are nurtured. Many names have found a Tamil identity but it isn't difficult upon close inspection to trace the transitioned names back to the original Veddah identity. Kandan (Kanda), Velan (Vela), Kadiran (Kadira) and Walli (Walliamma) are instructive examples of this tracing.



The coastal Veddahs are immensely proud when speaking of their relationship with Lord Kataragama. Their explanation seems cinematic, but like all things supernatural there is a sense of both reverence and cynicism that accompanies it. 'Long time ago the Veddah king in the area surrounding the current shrine in Kataragama was under the rule of Okanda, who was also a direct descendant of 'Kuveni'. He had an adopted daughter by the name of 'Walli' and she who was the reason for Lord Kataragama to visit the country'. They go on to tell us that 'Walli is one of us and therefore the Hindu lord is also one of us.'

The annual pilgrimage, that the coastal Veddahs make to Kataragama has a history of its own and is traced back to generations before. According to them, the shrine of yesteryear consisted only of a small hut. 'Our forefathers used to make this pilgrimage in groups of two or three, unlike today. Before the journey, they prayed to Lord Ganesh, the brother of Lord Kataragama to make the journey easy. Lord Ganesh answered their prayers and sent elephants to clear the jungle path during the journey', they said.

The coastal Veddahs explained that during the journey their forefathers had hunted in order to satisfy their hunger. Seldom do we find any pilgrim visiting the shrine after consuming any form of meat due to the fear of attracting the wrath of the Gods. The present day coastal Veddahs also seems to have transitioned towards

this belief. 'None of us consume any meat before the journey or during the journey when visiting the shrine' they confirm.

Due to the historical link between the Veddahs and Lord Kataragama, the Veddahs receive prime positioning during the ceremonies conducted at the shrine. The 'Kataragama Pageant' takes place only after ceremonial permission is granted for it by the Veddahs. The leader of the Pageant is a Veddah named 'Borada' from the Dambana clan. However the Tamil speaking Veddahs are often ignored at the ceremonies, in which their Dambana relatives overshadow them.

They seem to have no qualms about this fact, and find genuine solace in the fact that it is 'one of us' that leads the procession. 'Though we aren't involved in the ceremony we are happy to see a member of our community leading the way during the Pageant' they say.

The coastal Veddahs also find salvation in the fact that they are given due recognition during the feast at the Verugal Murugan Kovil situated in the vicinity of their current habitat. The Kovil which is dedicated to Lord Kataragama during its annual feast seek the blessings of these Tamil speaking Veddahs.



Verugal – An iconic place of religious worship for the coastal Veddahs

In Verugal, in the Eastern Province, lies a small kovil, worn by time and weather, unembellished in a similarly plain patch of land surrounded by a few banana trees. A homely site of worship, it seems uneventful as one glimpses it off the corner of the main road. Yet this is a place of legend and lore which holds in its unassuming exterior the problems that modern coastal Veddahs face when recovering their Veddah identity from the centuries of cultural integration.

Originally at the site of the kovil was a tree that the Veddahs used as a site of worship. As the legend goes, a certain Nallanathan Chettiar made a pilgrimage from India to Kataragama to seek a cure for his skin disease. On his journey south from Jaffna, he paused under a tree in Verugal and fell asleep. In his dreams he had seen Lord Kataragama, a strong figure of worship for traditions of both Veddahs and Hindus, instructing him to build a kovil at the place where he fell asleep. When Nallanathan told Lord Kataragama that he did not have the means to do this, the Lord replied and said that the means would be provided and that one had to seek the path of the fallen branches. When Nallanathan woke up there was a clear path marked by fallen branches and legend has it that his skin condition had also disappeared by then. When he followed the path he came upon a treasure of gold in a place now called Thanganagar or the 'City of Gold'. To obtain the gemstones necessary to build the kovil, Nallanathan travelled to Kandy to the king's jeweller. There he took two gemstones, hiding them and

returned to Verugal. It is said that although horsemen were set after him they had been delayed by various incidents including a brief spell of blindness before reaching Verugal. When Nallanathan managed to convince the horsemen that he took the gemstones to build the kovil, they returned to Kandy. Nallanathan dedicated a small room in this kovil to Lord Kataragama and legend has it that he went into this room one day and never returned.

In a story that ought to be the setting for harmonious coexistence of two traditions of worship, lie the roots of what has now become the muting of Vedic religious worship at present. The kovil festival lasts for 18 days and on the 13th day, the statue of Lord Kataragama is taken out on a pageant, as part of the celebration. Tradition has it that the Veddahs of the area have the responsibility of doing this but in the recent past they have been stripped off this role.

There was no explanation as to why the Veddahs had been excluded from the procession but a reasonable conclusion was that with the passing of time Hindu traditions had overtaken the Veddah traditions with no one questioning as to what was happening. Currently, 4 Veddah members sit in the 18-member Board of Trustees of the Verugal Kovil. The Board oversees all matters concerning the kovil and several requests have been made to the Trustees to allow the Veddahs rightful participation in the kovil festival.

The Veddah clan- ‘The Varige’

The coastal Veddahs are often referred to as ‘Vardar’, ‘Vardaa’ or ‘Vedar’. The common meaning of which is Veddah. The similies have evolved due to Tamil language influence and the impact on the coastal Veddahs. They are also referred to as ‘Palaya aalkal’ (ancient people), a term ethnic Tamils fall back to when referring to a Veddah. This reference proves that many Tamils living in the vicinity of the Veddahs appreciate that they are in the fact old inhabitants of the land.

Lakshan Dias, a researcher on the lives of the coastal Veddah says that the Veddahs prefer referring to themselves as ‘Vedar’ or ‘Vedar Vellalar’. However, according to Dias the older generation of Veddahs from the Mankarni village, refer to themselves as simply Veddahs.

The title Vellalar is associated with the Tamil caste system prevalent in the north and the east. According to the caste hierarchical system, the Vellalar are an elite caste, thereby they receive privileges that are not associated with those of the lower castes. The Vellalar caste represents farmers, who are considered the highest of all castes apart from the Brahmins in the north of the country. This linkage with the title of Vellalar has helped the Veddah to shun his natural identity resulting in some acceptance within modern society. However, upon close inspection one would find out that this term has not been associated with Veddahs of the previous generation. Seligmann or Prof Nandadeva Wijesekara, make no mention of this identity integration and therefore it can be assumed that the evolution was during the latter half of the 20th century. Unlike many indigenous groups, the Veddahs are proud of their culture and heritage and seek to preserve it unless circumstances are clearly unfavourable, hence the integration can be attributed to the natural evolution of the Veddahs, rather than any external factor. Many of the Veddahs of the older generation were proud of the fact that they were in fact Veddahs and referred to themselves as Vardar. However, the younger generation seems less inclined to acknowledge the essence of their forefathers and preferred to call themselves Tamils as opposed to Vardars.

The clan or sub clan of the Veddah plays an extremely important part within the community. The Veddahs residing in the country’s central region, consider their clan a very important factor even today. During colonial times, the identity of a Veddah was decided upon an individual knowing about his clan,

his religion and his livelihood of being a hunter. If the criteria were met, the individual was considered to be a part of the country’s indigenous community. Both Hugh Neville and Seligmann agree on the fact that the Veddahs of the east coast had a clear idea about their clan. Seligmann goes a step further and proclaims that the Veddahs at that time had an understanding of the clans of the Veddahs residing in the central part of the country. Seligmann points out in his writing that ‘Some, but not all, of the Coast Veddahs know the names of the varige to which they belong, and a few also know the names of some of the more important varige of the Veddahs inland. Uru varige appears to be the varige to which most of the Coast Veddahs who remembered their ancestral varige heritage belonged, but a few men stated that they belonged to Ogamam, Kavatham, Umata or Umatam, Aembaneduwe and Aembalawa varige; the last named and the one before it, probably being the same as the Aembelawa varige, found inland. Some of the coastal Veddahs whom we questioned said they had heard of, and still knew of, certain of the old Veddah varige, and such men were generally able to mention Morane varige, while some also knew of Unapane varige.’

A few Veddahs of the bygone era seem to recall their clan or sub clan with certainty. In the village of Mankarni, a female by the name of Bandan Mankarni, recalled that she was a part of the Singawanniyan clan. Another feeble lady from the same village stated that she belonged to the Aembalawa clan. The Aembalawa tribe, despite being known in the early records of the Veddahs, was considered a lost tribe. Finding a member of that tribe can be considered an unearthing of a component that is of major historical significance. What can be assumed here is that the older generation in the bygone era had a need to protect the identity of their respective clans. However, with the evolution of economic, socio and cultural factors this need to protect the identity would have been lost, thus resulting in the younger generation having no idea or knowledge about their historical background.

Seligmann wrote on the coastal Veddahs clearly, on the lines of their clans. He says ‘The Aembalawa clan undoubtedly migrated from the interior of the country and Dimbulagala. This clan is only known among the coastal Veddahs’, this factor has eluded many a researcher in the past and the reason for it is still unknown.





Coastal Veddahs attending the International Day of the World's Indigenous People in Vakarai in 2011



“ They also take part in an annual celebration known as ‘Sadangu’ which the other local Tamils play no part in ”

Lakshan Dias, who focused on the Kaluwankarni village in the Batticaloa District, found three distinct variables within the coastal Veddah community. These variables were visible when demarcating their groups’ ownership on cow skin. The Veda Vellalar used a bow and arrow, Motukadu Vedar has a symbol of a bow and arrow interconnected and the Kuranguththini Vellalar used a bow and arrow aiming at the sky, to demarcate the difference.

A 75-year-old female Veddah, residing in the area of Kattamurippu named Kanapathi Lechchimanal was of the opinion that there were seven different clans amongst them. She however could only recall the names of four which were Kadira Vanniyan, Ilasinghe Vanniyan, Pumantha Vanniyan and Vela Vanniyan.

S.O. Canagaratnam in his monumental work, *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province of Ceylon* (1921) considered the Vedar as a separate caste among the Tamil community itself. According to his caste structure, the Vedahs were the lowest caste prevalent at the time of writing the book. However, what can be deduced from this inclusion is the fact that the Vedar or Veddahs were a prominent community at the time to be included within his caste hierarchy. There is also a succinct relationship between one of the main ‘Evil Spirits’ of the Veddahs of the area, the ‘Gale Yaka’ and Batticaloa, a fact Canagaratnam acknowledges.

John Dart in his book *Veddahs in transition - the vanishing aborigines of Sri Lanka* (1990) spells out the marriage system of the coastal Veddahs. He writes ‘As with local Tamils, the preferred marriage pattern is based on cross cousin preference. Parallel cousins are considered brothers and sisters and are ineligible as partners. As most marriages take place between first and second cousins, clan endogamy, even though present, is of no value. Within a village, most of the residents are related and this carries on over to villages that are three to five miles away as well. The longer the distance, the more distantly the villagers relate to each other. Related lineages also maintain places of worship that are the private property of the family group.’





Kunjankalkulam

The story of a coastal Veddah village

This village belongs to the main eastern District of Batticaloa. It is situated along the Valachchenai-Vakarai Road, where a passerby would find a village by the name of Kajuwaththa. The village is positioned 7 km from the turn at Kajuwaththa near the Kunjankalkulam tank. As it stands today, there are 68 families of indigenous origin residing in this village and much to our dismay, not a single individual could connect themselves or their families with a clan or sub clan of the coastal Veddahs or any other Veddahs.

In the vicinity of the village one would come across an army camp and to our surprise, none of the members of the military were aware of the presence of 'coastal Veddahs' in the area until we pointed it out to them during the course of our visit and subsequent research. However, the officers and soldiers alike agreed to the fact that they saw a distinct difference between the inhabitants of the village and normal Tamil civilians. However, they had not pursued the reason behind this difference. Upon discovery, the officials showed keen interest in the research and helped us discover the roots of these coastal Veddahs. Despite the assistance, we found it a very difficult task to retrieve the real roots of these people as they themselves did not know anything about their origins. Therefore it was decided that we visit the village of Mankarni, which is considered to be the point of migration for the coastal Veddahs of Kunjankalkulam. During our research in Mankarni we came across some very interesting facts which helped us understand important factors regarding the village inhabitants, 'The Vedars'.

History and lifestyle

Speaking to us, the village folk of Mankarni stated that around two generations ago their livelihood was hunting. They used the jungles in the vicinity to hunt for prey. The generations of yore had used the traditional bow and arrow when hunting for prey. They were also involved with traditional Veddah customs as preserving food using honey, making maximum use of crops growing beneath the surface of the earth and fishing. All these means of livelihood point out to the core of the traditional Veddah livelihood.

However, during the post independence period of Sri Lanka beginning in 1948, the then Prime Minister of the country, D.S. Senanayake, had taken the prerogative to resettle these indigenous folk. The Veddahs who lived the traditional hunter's lifestyle were resettled in Mankarni, where they were compelled to take up native cultivation. Later on, they were subject to a second phase of resettlement and given the village of Kunjankalkulam to live on.

Velayudam alias Velu, relating the history as to how the name 'Kunjankalkulam' came into existence, gave us a very interesting account. 'There was a Veddah by the name of Kunjan living in the village of Mankarni. One day, while hunting Kunjan had come across a group of officials and during the ensuing discussion had suggested that they build a dam close to a mountain of stone. Later on, the state built a dam at the exact spot that Kunjan had pointed out. Since the place was shown by Kunjan, the name Kunjan was given. 'kal' in Tamil means stone and 'Kulam' in Tamil means dam. So the name given to the village is a basic literal translation of the word, describing the area and its roots.'

The Veddahs, who were being streamlined into society, faced numerous threats from the native Tamil population. The younger generations were compelled to attend Tamil speaking schools, which resulted in the native language of the Veddahs being lost. They were also subject to exploitation by rich land owners of the area. This was due to the restrictions placed on the Veddahs traditional livelihood of hunting.

Societal organisation

Leadership among this community is inherited. The current chieftain of the community is 75-year-old Sellathambi. His father Kannamuththu and grandfather Chiththira, both held the position of village chieftain prior to their demise.



“ ...two generations ago their livelihood was hunting. They used the jungles in the vicinity to hunt for prey ”

What is most interesting about Sellathambi is his outward appearance. Unlike many coastal Veddahs who possess dark skin and a diminutive stature, Sellathambi's complexion can be considered as fair, much like the Veddahs living in the central region. His hair was tied to the back of his head and he sounded very protective and proud of it. When queried further regarding his hair, he told us that he was taught this by his mother, who had wanted him to follow his father's and grandfather's footsteps, hence he was never allowed to cut his hair since he was a child. Sellathambi can be considered a genetic link between the Veddahs in the central region and the coastal Veddahs.

Sellathambi denies vehemently any implication that his lineage is of Tamil blood; the coastal Veddahs show fierce pride in their tribal heritage. He learnt Tamil at school but only spoke the Veddah dialect at home with his parents. His paternal origins lie in Mankarni: his ancestors created that village as a result of extensive chena cultivation. However, he relocated to Kujankalkulam out of fear of the Army after a particularly scarring experience. Sellathambi became chief of this village by being the eldest member of the village. The functional chieftainship, however, now lies with a much younger Nallathambi Veluyudam who takes all administrative decisions.

Despite Sellathambi being acknowledged as the leader of the community, his authority on his subjects seemed limited. There was an instance we experienced this firsthand when the rest of the community and the leader were at loggerheads with regard to the participation in the 'Deyata Kirula', an exhibition organised by the State to celebrate the country's development process annually. Sellathambi vehemently opposed any suggestion of participating in the exhibition saying that 'My mother had told me not leave this land, so I won't and I don't want any of you to leave it too.' The dispute was set to be resolved under a tree, which the community uses as a meeting point. The majority decided against Sellathambi and he apathetically had to bow down to the majority view. When we inquired about this overturning of the decision of the chief, the members of the community were of the opinion that there was no binding effect in the decisions made by the chief. They however acknowledged the fact that previous generations of the community would never overturn, or overrule a decision made by the chief of the clan.

This attitudinal difference can be directly attributed to the changing social times and norms. Socio-economic progress has not left room for authoritarianism based on a traditional monarchical structure even within the boundaries of the indigenous community, a shift that is common to all mankind.

Customs – Birth, marriage and death

Many of the traditional customs that were considered imperative among the coastal Veddahs have been lost due to the influence of native Tamils, the impact of the civil war and other external factors. These factors have rendered the traditional Veddah community, an obsolete community in many an observer's eye.

However, much to our surprise, there were a set of rituals practiced by the coastal Veddahs that can be considered unique. At the birth of a child, the villagers ensure that the mother drinks a concoction based on bees honey and a herb by the name of 'Kayam'. This custom is not seen among Tamils living in the vicinity.

The customs surrounding marriage have evolved overtime to include many traditional Hindu marriage customs. While most veddahs marry with the woman tying a string around the husband's waist, in this tribe a marriage is finalised by an elder linking the fifth fingers of the couple together. However, there was no addition of a string to tie them, as in Sinhalese and Tamil cultures.

There funeral customs can be seen as a mix between the Tamil and coastal Veddah culture. The defining and most distinct difference between the two cultures is the reverence with which the dead are considered. The dead among the Veddahs are considered deities who would look after the living and this sentiment holds true among the coastal Veddahs of the area. They show great fear and reverence to their dead which is common among all Veddahs of the country. The burial is done according to economic comfort where the rich would get a casket and the poor would follow the traditional Hindu method of wrapping the body in a white cotton cloth prior to burial or cremation.

The dead are washed and cleaned prior to burial and wrapped in a white cloth with a red mottu placed on the forehead of the dead. The body is buried within a day of death and kept outside the house or dwelling of the family. The Veddahs believe that unless the body is clean, the gods would not accept the soul residing within the body. They also insist on the burial taking place within a day due to the belief that once a full day has passed there is a tendency for the spirit to reach out from the body and cause harm. The body is kept outside the house or dwelling, due to the fear of 'dark souls', which according to belief, will bring harm to the dwelling and its inhabitants. Once the burial takes place, the Veddahs move away from the vicinity of the burial as fast as possible. This is due to the fear that the spirit within the body will follow them and cause harm. They also mark the place of the burial with a stick, this is done in order to restrict the spirit from breaking away and causing harm to the village. Once the Veddahs go back to their dwellings, they use a knife and pierce the trees to ward off all possible evils which are associated with the dead.



Beliefs and rituals

The influence of neighboring Tamils who follow the Hindu belief system has had a great impact on the coastal Veddahs. Pilliyar the god of wisdom, Murugan the god of Kataragama and Mari amman are deities these Veddahs predominantly pay homage to. These are the very same deities or gods that the Hindus hold in reverence.

The members of the Kunjankalkulam community also worship a deity by the name of 'Vardar Deyyam', the literal translation of which is 'Lord of the Veddahs'. This deity is common to all Veddahs alike. The Veddah chief of the central Veddahs, Vanniyalaththo was of the opinion that both strands of Veddahs worship the same god, and in the event the name differs, the rituals associated with the worshipping of the lord are very similar in both communities (coastal and central Veddahs). However, it was acknowledged that the language used by the two communities differ, but upon close inspection it was observed that the prayer offered to the gods had words which were originally of the 'Vedi' language. This fact was evident during the worship of the god 'Indigolle Kiri amma'.

The members of the Kunjankalkulam clan also refer to their gods by the names of 'Udarata Deyyo' or 'Kele Deyyo' - both terms describe the environs of the gods. A very interesting fact on the commonality of gods between the two strains of Veddahs is their common worship to 'Kiri amma' or Kuveni, the queen of the Yakkas and whom many consider to be the mother of all Veddahs. Both Veddah communities hold this deity at the highest of their worship structure. The coastal Veddahs refer to this deity as 'Mokkadi Thevam'.

The Kunjankalkulam Veddahs offer prayer to their deities at chosen spots within the environs of the village. Sellathambi the chieftain of the clan offers his prayers to a designated tree situated behind his abode. The tree consists of a basic holy structure to which they make their offering. The structure contains a basic box and cloth in red and white. These are considered sacred

among the community. The use of the colour red in their worship is due to the influence of the Tamil community. The box that contains these elements is called the 'Anjuru Petti' and the rituals that are related to this temple are referred to as 'Sadangu'. The traditional prayer or offering, takes place during the middle months of the year, at the time the winds blow away towards the ocean or in Sinhala at the time of 'goda sulan'. The Veddahs divide their main deities into two distinct groups namely - 'Pirimi Deyyo' or male god and 'Muhudu Deyyo' or sea god.

Two of their sea gods are named, 'Parangiya' and 'Landes'. Parangiya is a term used by the Sinhalese when referring to the Portuguese and Landes is a term that has direct reference to the Dutch. What can be assumed here is the influence of the colonial masters within the indigenous community.

Livelihood of the Kunjankalkulam Veddahs

The main industry the members of the Kujankalkulam village indulge in is fishery. However, they seem to have forgotten their basic and unique armour for this purpose, the 'Mullambu'. This weapon was used widely by the coastal Veddahs of yesteryear, however many of the members of the current community do not use this item. According to the present Veddahs, they recall their forefathers using this weapon with precision to kill fish. The coastal Veddahs have used this weapon with much success to catch fish as the Striped Snakehead (Loola) and Green Chromit (Coralii).

The fumigation method is commonly used by Veddahs to collect bees' honey. However, according to the clansmen of the Kunjankalkulam village, they simply throw the hive up to the sky and let the gods dance and play with the bees while they are up in the sky. The collectors then take the honey they need and leave the excess portion for the bees so they can resume their nest. They, informed that they have never been stung or attacked during these collections.





Animal husbandry is an integral part of the Veddah



Life in Patalipuram

A Veddah village in the Trincomalee District

The study of coastal Veddahs in the Trincomalee District focused on a village named Patalipuram, situated within the jurisdiction of the Muththur Divisional Secretariat. According to historical records, the village is situated in the vicinity of the area called 'Lanka Patuna', where, according to folklore, was the place that the Indian princess Hemamala landed with the sacred tooth relic. There are five villages in this vicinity, including Patalipuram. They are Uppural, Nallur, Seenanweli and Neenakarni, all of which have a presence of the coastal Veddahs.

The inhabitants of the five villages are inter-related, and Patalipuram has a population of 574 individuals belonging to 244 families. Seenanweli consists of 80 families, Uppural 120 families, Nallur 176 and Neenakarni 130 families, respectively.

Customs - Birth, marriage and death

The Veddah communities living in and around the vicinity of Lanka Patuna have a mixture of past and present customs that they follow. The following narration tries to differentiate the customs of the two areas.

Previous generations of Veddahs at the birth of a child, would inform the head of the village about the new arrival to the family without delay. During the pregnancy, the mother would make offerings to the gods Badrakali, Muruga and Valli. The duties of the midwife, was performed by one of the members of the village who was known as Marithavichchi. The cutting of the umbilical cord was done using a special knife that was common to the family which was specifically used during the birth of children in that family. At the birth of the child, the villagers would feast on bees' honey and meat given at the expense of the family.

As soon as the male children reach an age of understanding, they are taken under the wings of the father who would teach them the subtleties of hunting,

and other traditional methods of Veddah life. The girls, once they reach a certain age, are left with the mothers who would inculcate family values into them and teach them to cook. These gender differentiations are prevalent among most modern societies and are not confined to the Veddahs alone.

According to the villagers, there was no room for intimate relationships between the sexes unless they had explicit approval from the parents. The marriages, like in many rural areas of the country, are conducted at the behest of the parents. The Veddahs however, believe that if the marriage is to work, there should be divine guidance and therefore they have a lot of faith in the gods they worship.

'Veddahs are prohibited from marrying outsiders. Once there is a proposal from one party and the other party agrees, both parties go to the Vedi Kovil (Vedda temple) in the jungle and ask for guidance and blessing from god Murugan. If the god approves of the union, he would show his approval by showing a blue light. Once approval is given by Murugan, the couple tie their little fingers signifying the marriage.'

The villagers place great importance in making sure that members of their clan marries within the clan. According to a villager, there was an instance when a female community member had fallen in love with an outsider. 'The moment our people heard about the affair she was beheaded; first as a punishment to her and secondly as a warning to the rest of the members of the community.'

Like their relatives in the Kunjankalkulam village, these Veddahs bury their dead within a day. Once the dead person is buried in the jungle, the rest come back to the village and offer the deities the food that the dead person relished. Once their offerings and prayers are over, the members who participated in the pooja are treated to food and drink. These poojas are conducted during the third, seventh and thirtieth day from the burial.



Beliefs and rituals

As with their neighbours from the Batticaloa District, the Hindu tradition plays a pivotal role in the lives of these Veddahs. However, interestingly they also worship a deity that the local Tamils undermine. They refer to their main gods as 'Kuveniyage Yakku'. According to Thalaivar Kanapathi Kanakasingham, Kaderi, Kambuliyan, Uththukudiyian, Udiramakali, Kinkiliyan, Sandimadevi, Sudalaweiran, Varaji, Kariyakkan and Kawarakali are among the Kuveniyage Yakku held in high esteem. When we asked them about a deity named 'Bandara' who the Vakaraï Veddahs revere, Kanakasingham told us that he knew of the god but did not show any enthusiasm in answering anything more about the deity. This might be due to Bandara not being held in as much high esteem as the other gods. When we asked him, about the god 'Landes', he elaborated and told us that this was a god who entered the country through 'Lanka Patuna'.

Among Kuveniyage Yakku there is gender differentiation. The female deity Kaderi resides on a specific tree. Therefore they pay their respects to this Kalliyamaram tree. Her pooja or offering consists of a roti made with rice flour mixed with arrack and cannabis and the meat of a slaughtered chicken. She is said to have the power to grant any wish, be it good or bad, to her subjects.

Kaderi's husband is known as Kambuliyan. He also receives the same offerings. According to the Veddahs, Kambuliyan is controlled by Kaderi thus if there is a favour requested from the husband, the wife is also given the same offering in hope that she would convince the husband.

Uththukudiyian is a deity that the launderers of clothes the 'Vannans' worship. Accordingly, what can be assumed is that there exists a caste hierarchical system within the community itself. Uththukudiyans wife is known as Udiramahali and both are offered local toddy, cannabis, arrack and roti as pooja.

The deity known as Kinkiliyan is considered to be a very powerful god among the community. He is said to be the protector of the Veddahs and offerings to him include milk rice and fruit. When we inquired from Kanakasingham about the prayer they offer this deity, he stated that it's entirely sung in the native Vedi language. The female deity known as Sandimadevi is renowned to be dangerous and evil. Her duties include breaking away of charms, a frightening aspect of the transcendental world even within contemporary Sinhalese society. Her offerings, as with the others include arrack, herb and bees honey.

The protector of the graveyard is known as Sudala. The common belief is that once the dead are buried, they would be possessed by this deity for 31 days during which time an 'interrogation' of some sort takes place. The dead are questioned about their deeds whilst they were in the land of the living and are sent to heaven or hell accordingly.





Female members of the coastal Veddahs



A community in the shadows

The Veddahs of Kalkudah

The village of Kalkudah is situated in one of the most scenic locations along the beautiful coastline of Batticaloa. The name of the village is derived from the direct translation of the phrase 'the rock bay'. Kalkudah, which is forty five kilometers from Batticaloa, comprises a population that makes a living through the fisheries industry, which has its resources in abundance along the coastline. According to government documents, many of the natives of this village find their roots within Tamil ethnicity. Apart from the Veddahs, a few 'Burghers' are found scattered around Kalkudah and they trace their lineage to the time of the Portuguese invasion of Ceylon.

However, a special community of people live within this village; a community that is not included within the official records of this country. They are most commonly referred to as Vardars or the coastal Veddahs living within the scenic village of Kalkudah. Investigative writers on Ceylon as Spittle and Seligmann have however not failed to mention their existence in their writings.

Today there are over a hundred families that trace their lineage to the Vardars living in the village. They believe that the number is far higher than that, but due to the transition that has occurred within the community through the influence of the Tamilian culture, a majority of the original natives have turned against their original 'genes' and are beyond recognition. One distinct location where these Vardars have found salvation is in a small village by the name of Pattiadichena situated within the precincts of Kalkudah. According to these villagers, the name for the village is derived from the fact that, during the time of their forefathers who used to cultivate chena, the animals used in the cultivation of the crop had kept distinct marks of their feet within the area. A direct bearing to this fact is found within the name Pattiadichena.

According to folklore these native coastal Veddahs have passed on from generation to generation; the original Veddah clan comprised of seven families. The subsequent enlargement of Veddahs, according to them, can be traced back to these seven families. The folklore extends to the fact that the mother of 'Kuveni' was a 'Vedi woman' and a native of the village of Kalkudah. How this is compatible with the belief that 'Kuveni' was the original mother of Veddah is open to debate.

These folk believe that they are a part of the 'Vilva' tribe. However, despite knowing the identity of their tribe, they failed to tell us about any other tribes that exists within the community. They seem to be out of touch with the Veddah community that exist in other parts of the country. They however are very keen to point out that the 'Vilva' tribe finds pride of place within the community as it is considered the highest in tribal hierarchy. Today, almost all of the coastal Veddahs communicate in Tamil; however according to an elderly member of the tribe, their forefathers are said to have spoken in the native Veddah language. He went on to show us his knowledge of the language but most of it sounded Sinhalese as opposed to the distinct Veddah language that many of the original citizens of the country use in other parts of the country.

Beliefs and rituals

Their identity as coastal Veddahs however has not diminished in one major aspect. Their reverence and veneration of deities find similarity with many other Veddah clans around the country. Despite the heavy influence of Hinduism within the community, the villagers still pay homage to deities that are intrinsically connected to the natives of this country. They also take part in an annual celebration known as 'Sadangu' which other local Tamils play no part in. During the course of the ceremony the coastal Veddahs venerate deities that are not connected to the gods found in Hinduism and this very fact as explained above proves their distinct identity and relationship with the Veddahs found in Dambane and Moneragala. The worship of Kiri amma and Lord Bandara find common ground between both, the coastal Veddahs and the Veddahs found within the inlands of the Island. Many of the deities that these Veddahs pay homage to find their names from villages which poses an interesting question for further study. Yakkure, Muruththane and Vakare are localities which still have a population, albeit it being very minimal, of Veddahs. The deity 'Thalawa Deyyanachchi' finds his roots from the village of Thalawa. What is unique about these names of the deities is the very fact that many of them are names of villages that are located inland and far from the coasts of the country.

“ The word Veddah is often associated with a bare chested man, carrying a weapon on his shoulder with his hair tied behind his head ”



“ These deities are prayed to in order to protect the community from sickness, supernatural adversities and other adversities ... ”

Indigolle Kiri amma
Makumbana Kiri amma
Malpala Kiri amma
Savimbala Kiri amma
Matiwala kiri amma
Yakkure Kiri amma
Muruththane Kiri amma
Kalu Banadara
Sudu Bandara
Sembanachchi
Mohini
Neeli
Kirigal Achcha
Nilgal Achcha
Vedi Achcha
Mannurugopathana Achcha
Kiri Ala Achchiyar
Valpothana Nachcha
Masambhawan Nachchi
Thalawa Deyyanachchi
Udamaththal Deyyanachchi
Muragala Deyyanachchi
Vakare mundane Deyyanachchi
Nawal adi athumudala
Karandaputu athumudala
Veyyanoru athumudala
Veramani athumudala
Gal kirichchi
Mahola gepala mulaththani
Panang kawala dawudda
Pollukara
Eladimala kumari
Kiri Munde

These deities are prayed to in order to protect the community from sickness, supernatural adversities and other adversities that come by way of planetary change, beliefs which are a part and parcel of everyday life of many Sri Lankans. In Kalkudah, we met a person named Nathan Vellupillai who conducts the ceremonies and prayers offered to these gods. He takes the shape of a prelate and what was most surprising during the rituals was the fact that many Veddahs from other provinces of the country visit the temples of these gods in order to pray for protection. The previous is an exhaustive list of the deities this community pays homage to and consists of a few deities who are distinct to the coastal Veddahs. However, many of these deities find common subjects in the form of both coastal and inland Veddahs.

Unique customs during death

Many of the traditional rituals and observances which are distinct to the Kalkudah Vardars have today become obsolete with Hindu influence taking precedence during the transition. According to the Vardars, their forefathers conducted rituals and ceremonies that were unique to them and did not dilute the rituals due to the influence of the locality of their habitat. However the most significant departure from the influence of Hinduism is found in the funeral service of the Vardars. The general cemetery in Kalkudah has within it a separate block demarcated for the Vardars; this fact could give many an inference as to the fact that even the locals treat them as a separate community distinct from the Tamils resident in the area.

The dead are usually covered in white cloth much like the Muslims and buried accordingly. Prior to the complete filling of sand at the burial site, the Vardars throw sand into the dead man's grave. Once the grave is fully closed up the Vardars throw flowers on to the top of the grave and subsequently conduct a ceremony at the home of the dead in order to invoke blessings on their relative. During this ceremony, the Vardars use water, rice, and the crust of the king coconut. The ceremony is conducted by a 'Poosari' (a priest) who is known to communicate with the dead and also possesses supernatural powers.

During the ceremony the Poosari calls for the dead member of the clan who subsequently possesses the Poosari. The dead man then through the Poosari tells

his relatives the reason for his death and confirms if the death was due to natural causes or otherwise. If the death is due to non-natural causes, the Vardars believe that the spirit would inform them as to the particulars of it, with the name of the murderer, the method of the murder- all being communicated openly. The Vardars pay great reverence to this ceremony and do not doubt the communication by the dead.

Subsequently the relatives visit the grave of the dead three days after the burial. During this visit the relatives decorate the grave with flowers and pour milk on to the site of the burial, but this visit is devoid of any communication with the dead. The seventh day ceremony however, takes a dramatic turn with the relatives conducting a ritual in which milk rice is used, and spiritual chanting takes place in order to call the soul of the dead. During this seventh day ceremony the soul re-lives the moment of death and explains the reason for the death. Subsequently, on the eighth day the relatives visit the grave again in the wee hours of the morning and shower the grave with flowers and fresh water. In the night of the eighth day the relatives invite all gods they believe in and release the soul for the protection of the gods. The gods and deities that trace their lineage to the Veddah community take precedence in invitation during this ceremony. As is usual among many Sinhala funerals, the relatives are bound to stay in the house of the dead for eight days running in order to protect the house from evil spirits.

The main ceremonies thus ends on the eight day of the death; however, the relatives conduct a ceremony one month subsequent to the parting of their beloved at which time they pay homage to Lord Ganesh and invoke blessings on the dead relatives' soul. During the time where communication was not within the reach of a click of few buttons, the Vardars believe that the death of a relative was always communicated to those residing in localities far from the place of death by some mysterious force. The Vardars state that accordingly their forefathers visit a certain place not knowing there is a death only to find out that the intuition to visit the place was to inform the said person about the death of their relative. They believe that this fact is communicated by souls that are pure and find lineage to the community.



Vanniyalaththo visits the east

The leader of Sri Lanka's indigenous Veddahs, Uruvarige Vanniyalaththo, visited Veddahs living in the eastern coast for the first time in the tribe's recorded history. The visit facilitated two activities; namely the chief visiting his relatives of a different habitation and witnessing for himself the lives and livelihood of members of the East Coast Veddah community. The agreement to hold the International Day of the World's Indigenous People in Vakare, Batticaloa was an outcome of this visit and an event which highlighted the existence of the coastal Veddahs and drew attention to their often forgotten existence. The visit was facilitated by Dilmah Conservation. The visit of the chief Veddah is captured below:

Vanniyalaththo visits the east in search of his relatives

The journey in search of the Veddahs of the east began in Dambane, the de facto capital of the traditional Veddah clan. We journeyed through lands and paths that were for generations before the territory of the Veddah, towards the eastern part of the island. As we passed through Padiyathalawa and came towards the Mahaoya Junction, we were all reminded that it was not only the Veddahs but also the general population of this country who had lost all rights to this 'territory' for close to three decades. The Mahaoya-Chenkaladi A5 road was territory beyond the control of a united Sri Lanka and was the terrain of terrorists who controlled that part of Sri Lanka prior to the end of the conflict. We were told that there used to be Veddah settlements in areas as Unnichchiya, Pullumale and Tampitiya in the past. 'Sudu Hura' as the great writer R. L. Spittel was known to the Veddahs and Seligman, who to this date claims authorship for the most authoritative text on the Veddahs of Sri Lanka, have made passing mention on the existence of Veddahs in these areas.

The main aim of this visit by Vanniyalaththo, as the leader of the Veddahs of Sri Lanka, was to visit members of his clan who have expanded their settlement to the coastal areas of the country. It was to be a meeting of two distant relatives, one the traditional Veddah and the other, the Vardars or the coastal Veddahs, who comprise of a predominantly Tamil ethnicity.

The first stop during the Veddah chiefs' journey was in Vakara. The 233 Division of the Sri Lanka Army that controls the area, headed by Colonel

Thilak Weerakoon greeted the chief and a small welcome ceremony ensued. By the time we arrived at the place, there were many locals who had made their journey to the Army Camp subsequent to a notice regarding the arrival of the Veddah chief.

When we reached our destination which was the habitat of the coastal Veddahs, they greeted their leader whom many were seeing for the first time, with utmost respect. As is common among Sri Lankans, many of the coastal Veddahs worshipped their leader when welcoming him into their habitat. During the discussions that resulted from the meeting, it was decided to hold the International Day of the World's Indigenous People on a beautiful strip of beach named Sallathivu, not too far from Vakara. The Army agreed to provide necessary support for the event. It was decided by all present that the coastal Veddahs would be given the attention they deserve during the ceremony, albeit the clan being in sheer obscurity to this day with no mention or recognition of their distinct historical links throughout the course of time.

A journalist by the name of K. Ruthiran who was present to cover the visit of the Veddah chief told Vanniyalaththo that he was also a descendant of the Vardars. When we asked Ruthiran if there were any factual basis to the assertion that the current Chief Minister of the Eastern Province Sivanesutharai Chandirakanthan alias Pillayan, a former member of the now defunct LTTE, was also part of the Vardar community. Ruthiran was quick to answer our query confirming our assertion. 'Yes, I'm an uncle of Pillayan therefore he is also a Vardar. It is not only him but even current Member of Parliament Seenithambi Yogeshwaran, Provincial Councilor Nagalingam Thiraviyan alias Jeyam, and the Chairman of the Vakara local council are all Vardars' he added.

During our research it was confirmed that Ruthiran's narration was accurate. During the last local government election, a member of the Veddah community was elected from Dehiaththakandiya, and it was stated in many media reports that this was the first Veddah to be elected into office. However this stands to be corrected as it was evident to all of us that in fact all of the above are members of the Veddah community. If one is to research further into this matter they would be able to find many other representatives with an indigenous identity from the Eastern Province.

Vanniyalaththo meets a long lost member of the Aemalawa clan during his visit to the Eastern Province. This is a significant discovery made by Dilmah Conservation as they were reported to have gone extinct.



Following discussions, the Veddah chief journeyed to Mankarni, an area which captured headlines during the latter stages of the war. The chief made this trip in order to meet a special person by the name Chiththiran Sinnayyah. Sinnayyah, was the most senior citizen of the coastal Veddah community and was in his 92 year. His hair resembled that of a Veddah, long and in rumbles but his memory was failing him. His eyesight was not in its optimum and his body resembled the age of a man who is nearing a century of existence. Therefore he could not move and we had to speak to him at his bedside. We asked him if he remembered his clan and Sinnayyah pondered for a moment and spoke 'We are from the Aembalawa clan; there was a clan called Morana as well.' His slow but steady recollection amazed all of us present including the Veddah chief. This clan was known to have gone extinct and therefore, Sinnayyah was possibly the last witness to the existence of this tribe. He recalled the lives and livelihoods of coastal Veddahs of yesteryear despite his failing memory and provided us with a glimpse of the lives and times of the Veddah a generation before. Subsequently we bid adieu to him and ventured into the towns of Mankarni and Kunjankalkulam. The Vardars, despite looming nightfall, waited patiently to catch a glimpse of their leader, Vanniyalaththo.

The Veddah chief spent the first night of this historical journey at the 233 Divisional Headquarters in Vakara. The chief thanked the Army for their hospitality and embarked on the next edition of his tour, visiting his fellow relatives living in the Trincomalee District. The chief together with the few of us went across the 'Verugal Aru' which divides the Trincomalee and Batticaloa Districts. The chief then visited the Verugal Kovil situated just by the side of the moat where he was greeted by Kathirgamathamby Thirunawarakasu who is a member of the Kovils's Board of Trustees.

Thirunawarakasu was happy with the visit but seemed disappointed at the current status quo of the temple. 'This Temple belonged to the Vardars for generations, however now it is predominantly used for Hindu ceremonies and we cannot even conduct our traditional ceremonies. We have around ten thousand of us residing in this province and it's caused a lot of disharmony

among the Vardars. As the chief, we request you to ensure that justice prevails' he complained. The trustee went to explain the current situation of the coastal Veddahs residing in the vicinity and said that a few members of this community represent the people in the Ichchalanpaththu local council. He also went on to tell us that many youth of Vardar origin are held in rehabilitation camps due to their involvement with the LTTE. The Veddah chief listened patiently to Thirunawarakasu and inquired about the traditional offerings of the Veddahs.

Subsequently the chief visited the Kalladi Buddhist temple, a place of worship that was once used by the LTTE as their communication headquarters. Today, it is considered a sacred shrine for Buddhists throughout the country. The temple comprises timeless antiquities and the prelate who resides at the temple, Ven. Rathnapure Devananda had a good grasp of the native Tamil language. After visiting this village we ventured towards Patalipuram, Neenakarni, and Nallur, all areas situated in close proximity to Sampur. The native indigenous community living in these areas welcomed the Veddah chief with utmost respect. 'We intend to build a statute to commemorate your visit to our area or construct a community hall in your name, we feel bad that we have to welcome you under the shade of a tree' they lamented.

The Veddah chief Vanniyalaththo seemed pensive about the enthusiasm shown by his kind. 'All I did was to visit this place, I haven't had the opportunity to serve you, therefore, there's no need to erect anything on my behalf. If one day I get the opportunity to serve you, on that day you can show me your gratitude. Either way I prefer to stand by the shade of this tree rather than sweating inside a building' he told them. He also promised to look into one of the main requests, which we heard consistently throughout the visit, regarding the need to include the inhabitants' indigenous identity in all official documents.

The Veddah chief Uruvarige Vanniyalaththo concluded his first official visit to the coastal Veddah community by assuring that he would take the time to visit these areas, especially the areas that he could not visit. He assured the local Veddahs that their requests would be conveyed to His Excellency the President in due course.

“ The Vardars, despite looming nightfall, waited patiently to catch a glimpse of their leader, Vanniyalaththo ”



“ This meeting of the Veddahs to discuss and ensure that a common agreement is reached is known as the Varigasabha ”

The first **Varigasabha** in the east

The Veddahs who lived in small clans within the jungles of Sri Lanka, from time immemorial, were in the habit of discussing the problems that the clan faces through dialogue and reached decisions through common consensus. This was carried out under the patronage of the chief of the clan and the elders who are a part of the said clan. This meeting of the Veddahs to discuss and ensure that a common agreement is reached is known as the 'Varigasabha'- the meeting of the clan. However, subsequent to the departure of the Veddahs from their known territory, the environs of the jungle, and the slow transition into civilisation by way of habitats established in different parts of the country, the Varigasabhawa was also moved from place to place.

The Veddahs residing in the villages of Dambana, Rathu Gala, Pollebadda, Henanigala and Dalukana were of the opinion that the traditional Varigasabha be held to coincide with the International Day for the World's indigenous people. As a result of the request to this effect made to relevant officials, the the International Day of the World's Indigenous People 2008 was held under state patronage on 9th August, the day declared by the United Nations as the day for a nation's first inhabitants with the participation of the Minister of Cultural Affairs, and other senior officials. It was during the celebrations held in 2008 that the coastal Veddahs also became part of the event. Until the year 2010, all subsequent Varigasabha celebrations took place in Dambana. The coastal Veddahs, an integral part of the celebrations, had by then made a request that the Varigasabha be held in Vakare, on the eastern part of the island.

The chief of the Lankan indigenous community Uruwarige Vanniyalaththo and the Centre for Indigenous Community Heritage, of which he is the chief patron, readily agreed to the request of the coastal Veddahs. However, this was not to be an easy task due to its magnitude and the fact that Vakare had only recently been liberated after the long war that ravaged the country for three decades. Dilmah Conservation intervened on behalf of the coastal Veddahs and the Veddah community as a whole at this point to facilitate the event to be held in Vakare, and agreed to undertake total responsibility for organising the event. They also agreed to provide the necessary finances that were required to make the event a success.

Accordingly, Dilmah Conservation carried out a census regarding the villages that the coastal Veddahs had by then made their natural habitat, as part of the information gathering process to facilitate a successful Varigasabha. Subsequently, extensive discussions were held with the 233 Regiment of the Sri Lanka Army,

who controlled Vakare at the end of the war and Brigade Commander Colonel Thilak Weerakoon readily agreed to assist Dilmah Conservation in their endeavour to make the event a success. During the historic visit of the chief of the Veddahs Uruvarige Vanniyalaththo to the coastal Veddah communities, discussions had already been held with all stakeholders in this regard. However due to ensuing practical difficulties, the event was advanced to July instead of August. The scenic beach of Sallathivu, in Vakare bordering the coastal Veddah village of Panchakarni was selected as the venue for the event. The village of Panchakarni was infamous to many Sri Lankans during the war due to the bridge that connected Vakare over the lagoon. This was the site of severe LTTE resistance during the latter stages of the war.

The Sri Lanka Army undertook the task of preparing and decorating the Sallathivu beach with Dilmah Conservation providing the necessary finances. The invitees to the event included His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapaksa and a host of ministers who readily acknowledged and accepted the invitation.

In keeping with tradition, the congregation was set to be held in two different stages over a two-day period. The Veddahs, who arrived from far and wide, met on the evening of July 30 and held their traditional Varigasabha that night. All clans and communities were represented during the event and the Veddahs discussed common issues during the meeting. Subsequently, the Veddahs presented a cultural show of sorts showcasing their native and unique Veddah culture to those who were fortunate enough to witness it. John Collyer, a world famous Aborigine leader from Australia, was invited as a guest of Dilmah Conservation to witness this landmark event.

During the last day of the event, celebration to coincide with the International Day of the World's Indigenous People were held under to auspices of President Mahinda Rajapaksa. The Veddah community handed over a 'Sandeshaya' or a message written in the traditional Sinhala method to His Excellency the President and this contained the common problems that the Veddahs faced, and what had been discussed the previous night during the Varigasabha.

Addressing the gathered during the event, the President said that due recognition had been afforded to the coastal Veddahs for the first time in history. He added that although the coastal Veddahs had been marginalised and seldom given a chance to be appreciated, holding the Varigasabha in Vakare is itself a sign that justice is finally being done for coastal Veddahs.



His Excellency President Mahinda Rajapakse at the 2011 International Day of the World's Indigenous People held in Vakare



Vanniyaaththo with Dilmah founder Merrill J Fernando



Professor Sarath Kotagama admiring Veddab artifacts on display





Dilmah founder Merrill J Fernando and son Dilhan C. Fernando with John Collyer, an aboriginal leader from Australia and founder of Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative at the 2011 International Day of the World's Indigenous People held in Vakare



Vanniyalaththo with members of the Sri Lanka Army, Eastern Command







Challenges faced by the coastal Veddahs

The coastal Veddahs of today face many challenges and obstacles in their quest for sustenance. They are caught between the 'devil and the deep blue sea'. On the one hand, their traditional livelihoods have come under enormous threat and on the other, the continuity of their unique identity is at stake. The lack of a common leader to lead them is perhaps one of the main reasons for this sense of vulnerability. This is perhaps the reason as to why the Veddahs of Dambana have thrived under the united leadership of Vanniyalaththo. Terrible literacy levels amongst these Veddahs are attributed to the neighbouring Tamil community. Many Tamils of the area refuse to acknowledge the fact that the coastal Veddahs have a distinct culture and language, hence an identity that is not Tamil. They believe that since the Veddahs speak Tamil, they would also fall into the category of Tamils and would aspire and identify with the political and social causes of the Tamils.

The Veddahs, for a few decades, have been continuously registered as Tamil. According to Yuvaraj Thangarajah 'During many discussions I've had with officials, they have reiterated that the Veddah lifestyle should be on par with their neighbours. Since the Veddahs are heavily dependent upon the state and the neighbouring Tamils, it can be assumed that they were officially forced to let go of their cultural identity'.

The Vakare Veddahs have identified three distinct phases, the state has taken, which have resulted in an identity crisis. They believe that the first step was when the state decided to relocate and resettle them away from the jungles; phase number two was attributed to civilian migration towards the areas of the Veddahs and the other factor was ethnic tension between the native Sinhalese and Tamils of the country.


Lakshan Dias, an executive secretary in the Peace, Reconciliation and Reconstruction Committee in his paper titled 'Sinhala and Tamil Nationalism - east coast Veddahs', states 'In the same way the stealing of histories and vain attempts to impose upon other's heritages continues to this day. Within this phenomenon is the visible enterprise to establish one's claim as sons of the

soil. Within these immoral and unethical pursuits of the two major ethnic communities in Sri Lanka, Sinhala and Tamil, the Veddahs of Sri Lanka, who are undoubtedly the original 'sons of the soil', remain mercilessly squeezed. Veddahs, the indigenous people of Sri Lanka, are abused by both ethnic communities seeking to safeguard their own vested interests.'

The systematic 'civilisation' of the Veddahs goes as far back as the Dutch and Portuguese periods. These colonial masters of the country were the main architects of the relocation programme, wherein they resettled the Veddahs in agricultural areas. This was done in the hope that the Veddahs could be used for cultivating and the government could benefit from the taxes that were imposed.

However, the main threat to the Veddahs came from the English. They did not only impede the natural surroundings of the Veddahs but were adamant in forcing upon them a culture and religion that was alien. According to Yuvaraj Thangarajah, the English worked with the intent of 'anglicising' these 'savages' and therefore left no stone unturned in their quest. The anglicising of the Veddahs was handed over to certain missionary groups present in the country at the time.

S. O. Canagaratnam in his book *Monograph of the Batticaloa District of the Eastern Province, Ceylon* states that the English went as far as building a headquarters in Valachchenai, a village in the Eastern Province, with the sole intent of converting the coastal Veddahs to Christianity. There is also evidence to suggest that successive governments who have relocated the Veddahs into agricultural land have often given them unproductive land and this has had severe impact on the Veddah livelihood for generations. Hard times forced Veddahs to become man-servants while some ended taking up fishing. The fisheries industry in the east is a thriving industry and the Veddahs who took to it were to experience a heavy influx of cash; however due to poor management and illiteracy, many are said to have ended up as alcoholics.



The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who waged a separatist war against the state, used the coastal Veddahs to further their goals. The threat from the LTTE can be considered the main obstacle faced by the community during recent times. However, the use of the Veddahs to further the land owners' goals, have been a common occurrence and there is strong evidence to suggest that even the Dutch used these Veddahs as soldiers during their rule.

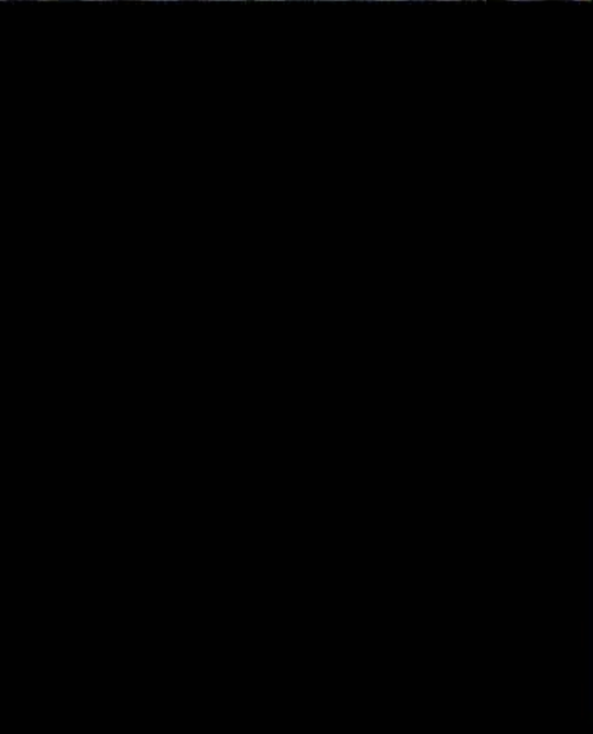
Yuvaraj Thangarajah who has thorough knowledge on issues regarding the north and east of the country writes 'The areas that the Veddahs lived in were often conflict zones. During the war, the Veddahs had to find shelter from the constant stream of bullets. The fact that many of the areas that have a Veddah population have constantly been 'won, lost and reclaimed' by both parties have not helped'. The forcible conscription of youth to the armed struggle by the LTTE, has also been a decisive, contributory factor in erasing or mitigating the Veddah identity.

The conclusion that can be reached by this study is the fact that the Veddahs of the coastal areas face numerous threats to their existence and livelihood. Despite the end of the civil war, the root causes of the war is yet to be addressed and the tensions among the two major communities still prevail. The offshoot of this conflict is the suffering of the original 'Sons of the soil'.

Lakshan Dias is precise in his summing up of the situation, and writes 'Thus evolutionarily the Veddahs are the indigenous people of Sri Lanka. The Veddahs are aborigines and have their links to Negroids, the biological sub-grouping of homo sapiens. The Sinhala and Tamil communities who emigrated from various parts of India, colonised Sri Lanka over the centuries and are today very crudely trying to suppress each other for authenticity. But they forget that they came from India or other parts of the world, and because of their existence in Sri Lanka, the indigenous people therein, the Veddahs are denied their identity and heritage. In fact, the Veddahs have become victims of both Sinhala and Tamil nationalists in their mutual objective of artificially claiming roots in Sri Lanka.'







Many contributed towards the success of this publication,
in numerous ways...



Dilmah Conservation

Our commitment to sustainability


Dilmah Conservation is part of the Dilmah Group's core commitment to sustainability. It was initiated in 2007 to incorporate environmental conservation efforts into the MJF Charitable Foundation, which focuses on social justice. The promise made by Dilmah Founder Merrill J. Fernando that business should be a matter of human service where the profits accrued are used for the benefit of the people and for taking care of the environment is deeply ingrained within the work programme of Dilmah Conservation.

The significance of establishing a conservation extension to the existing Foundation became an absolute necessity in the wake of the 2004 Asian Tsunami. This cataclysmic event, not only destroyed lives and livelihoods; it also created environmental destruction of unimaginable proportions which

needed to be addressed and remediated. In doing so, Dilmah Conservation carried out successful work in post tsunami rehabilitation and reconstruction of the lives, livelihoods and the environment.

Up to date, Dilmah Conservation has partnered with many institutions, including the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), Department of Wildlife Conservation, Universities of Colombo, Peradeniya, Moratuwa, and East, the Field Ornithology Group of Sri Lanka (FOGSL), and the Sri Lanka Army to carry out successful work programmes island-wide.





The initiatives carried out by Dilmah Conservation include ensuring sustainability in Dilmah tea gardens to improve its productivity, carrying out research on high yield food crops and biodiversity assessments to document the fauna and flora within Dilmah tea gardens. A dual purpose initiative was established to increase the green cover in Batticaloa through the planting of cashew trees and Dilmah Conservation hopes that this will translate into an income source for the communities in future. Education on peaceful coexistence with nature, environmental educations and awareness for healing rifts between communities are some of the activities that Dilmah Conservation has carried out successfully. Dilmah's commitment to implementing the Montreal Protocol in Sri Lanka is evident in the change over from ozone depleting chemical fumigants to earth friendly substitutes in Dilmah tea gardens.


This initiative has been recognised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as one of the success stories in implementing the Protocol in their publication Goal Zero – Success Stories from Asia and the Pacific in phasing out ozone depleting chemicals, UNEP 2010. Additionally, to uphold the Protocol and to encourage environmentally sound transportation, Dilmah's Small Entrepreneur Programme (SEP) supported nearly 50 bicycle repairmen from Batticaloa to upgrade their existing facilities in order provide better service to their customers.



Working with youth to inculcate conservation into their thinking was launched under the World Environment Day 2011 Initiatives and will continue through two novel projects, Go wild on the Web and Nature Database. These projects are designed to encourage youth to become involved in conservation using technology as the medium.







Work in the Udawalawe National Park and adjacent communities are part of Dilmah Conservations' Terrestrial Habitat and Species Conservation initiative aimed at making Udawalawe into a model national park. Dilmah supports the Elephant Transit Home (ETH) while continuously upgrading the Information Centre. The Mankada pottery centre in Udawalawe, set up by Dilmah Conservation produces world class pottery ware while providing livelihood opportunities for women from adjacent communities.





A programme to support and uplift the lives and livelihoods of indigenous Veddah's and nomadic Ahikuntaka people was launched by Dilmah Conservation under the Culture and Indigenous Communities Programme. The Ahikuntaka community will benefit with the setting up of an arts and crafts centre while the Veddah community will be supported to continue their traditional livelihoods.



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Dilmah Conservation will work closely with the Sri Lanka Army in Thoppigala, in eastern Sri Lanka to support social and economic progress of the communities while launching initiatives to regenerate the

land scarred by 30 years of war. As part of the activities, 20,000 trees will be planted and a cultural centre will be established to promote the historical, cultural and environmental significance of the area.




TION





Dilmah Conservation launched its Marine Habitat and Species Conservation Programme to address some of the salient issues affecting Sri Lanka's marine habitats. Dilmah Conservation currently carries out work in several marine habitats that are home to some of Sri Lanka's pristine coral reefs and important marine species. Research carried out includes status documentation of the reef as well as ongoing research on dugongs.



A close-up photograph of a purple lotus flower in full bloom, positioned in the upper right quadrant. The flower's petals are a vibrant purple with some darker, almost black, variegation. It is surrounded by large, bright green lily pads that have a glossy texture, reflecting light. The background is a dark, still pond, which provides a high contrast to the bright colors of the flower and leaves. The overall composition is serene and naturalistic.

Dilmah Conservation believes that every individual and business has an obligation to ensure sustainable interactions with the environment where man and nature can coexist in harmony.



For additional information visit our website at www.dilmahconservation.org









Dilmah Conservation was initiated in 2007 by the Dilmah Group to incorporate environmental conservation efforts into the MJF Charitable Foundation, which focuses on social justice. Dilmah Conservation works towards the sustainable use of the environment in partnership with other organisations including the International Union for Conservation of Nature - IUCN. The pledge made by Dilmah founder Merrill J. Fernando to make business a matter of human service is deeply ingrained in the work carried out by Dilmah Conservation. For additional information visit our website at www.dilmahconservation.org.



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