

Part II

HOLIDAYS AND HOLY DAYS

Holidaying in the hills

Holidays come but once a while; but when they do, they simply refuse to go, for they cling on to one's memory as if they have nowhere else to go, so that even in later times one could always relive those happy days that stand out so clearly from the rest that the mists of time have befogged and are but a haze. No truer can this be than the holidays one spends in the hills, amidst natural piles, heaps and mounds that soaring high like colossal cones peak hither and thither and seem to know no horizon, hemming in one's memories as they do their surroundings.

Some of the happiest days of our childhood we spent holidaying in the hill country, in the midst of mountain fastnesses the Sinhalese of old called *giri-durga* 'Rocky Fortification'. The mountains were, after all, an almost impregnable natural barrier that made foreign forays into the Kandyan Kingdom, the last independent Sinhalese kingdom, an extremely difficult one, which is the very reason why the jealously independent highlanders were able to hold out against the might of three European colonial powers well upto 1815, when it fell to the British, not due to the superior arms of the Imperial Raj, but because of the internal intrigues of the Kandyan chiefs.

Although my twin brother Asgar and I were highlanders by birth as we were born in Kandy and even spent the earliest part of our lives there, we would soon grow to be strangers to our natal land and eventually come to look upon it as an exotic place, rather enchanting really, like the cold countryside of a Hesperian fable, encompassed by virgin hills draped in sylvan raiment and caressed only by that whitish nebulous ether we called mist that seemed so strange and outlandish; a far cry

from the tropical urban jungle that was Colombo where we spent the greater part of our childhood.

Little wonder that our adventurous little family looked upon the central highlands as a getaway from it all, a cooling bower for a sultry summer. It certainly did not disappoint us, especially the spot we resorted to most – Nuwara Eliya, a peaceful little town nestled in the hills of a rugged country known to the Sinhalese of old as *Kanda-uda-Rata* ‘The Country on top of the Hills’, a name perhaps more suited for a fictitious tale set in some celestial realm beyond the clouds than the sun-kissed tropical island we lived in.



Holidaying in Nuwara Eliya with brothers. I had this habit of folding my arms for snapshots back then

This picturesque little town sat comfortably perched like a gigantic eagle’s nest on a mountain top, upon a huge, rather flat table-land that could only be reached by driving cautiously on long winding serpentine roads that traversed precipitous hillsides, vigilantly navigating countless hair-pin bends sculpted into the crowns of soaring mountains; mountain after mountain till the rugged terrain carpeted here and there with

patchworks of almost every imaginable tinge of green gave way to a vista of rolling hills densely clothed with tea bushes before lending itself to be groomed and garbed with the vestments of what men call civilization.

Nuwara Eliya was arguably the fastest developed metropolis in the country. Lost to the world and quietly reposing in an uninhabited tract of land visited occasionally only by hunters looking out for elks or sambhur, it was accidentally discovered by a shooting party in 1828 during the governorship of Sir Edward Barnes. Impressed with its cool climate which no doubt would have reminded him of his English countryside, this far-sighted British Governor of Ceylon decided to convert it into a sanitarium for sick British soldiers. Within a century or so, the spot, with its scenic Lake Gregory and other breathtaking natural features had been transformed into a typically European landscape with pinus trees and country houses in typical English style dominating the architecture. Little wonder then that it came to be known as ‘Little England’ to locals, a name perhaps originally bestowed by Englishmen who would have looked upon the spot as a home away from home.



Nuwara Eliya nestling in the hills

Our earliest visit to the place was when I was four years old. That was when father's friend and regular auction customer Sena Kavikara offered us his bungalow complete with caretaker for a holiday stay. We were soon on our way to the hills muffled in some sweaters mother had sewn out of flannel, blue with pink collar for me and Asgar and pink with blue collar for little brother Altaf. This old country style house in Glenfall Road even had an apple tree growing in its garden which the caretaker warned mother not to let us approach, inspired perhaps by the biblical story of our first parents. Of our stay there, I can recall only a few incidents and that too faintly.

For instance, being huddled around mother on the side steps of the house one evening while she regaled us with a pretty tale like *Cinderella*, *Goldilocks* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* from a little book she had brought along with her.



Sena Kavikara's bungalow where we holidayed. Recent photo

One day we found that the caretaker, inspired again perhaps by the biblical story of our first parents fall from grace at the

whims of a serpent, had killed a snake and was burning it in a bonfire he had formed of the dead leaves and twigs from the garden. This somehow excited our curiosity and we would learn later that burning dead snakes was necessary to prevent other snakes being attracted to the spot, it being the general belief that these snakes arrive on the scene to avenge the death of their fallen fellow. The belief had a scientific basis nevertheless, for serpents, even dead ones, are known to emit powerful scents known as pheromones which attract their kind of the opposite sex to the spot though the object of their desire lies lifeless.

Also memorable were the pear trees serving as hedges, the light green fruits of which mother would point to us as our car passed by. These famed pears, little doubt the descendants of those introduced by English planters a century or more ago, would, within a decade or so, disappear from Nuwara Eliya's home gardens, the result, it is believed of some fungal rot that came riding on the wings of the 1978 cyclone, wiping out the entire lot, just like the coffee blight a century earlier had destroyed the region's thriving coffee plantations.



Pear trees such as this were once common in Nuwara Eliya

The results of this earlier blight we could see around us in the vast tea estates that had taken the place of coffee. Tea certainly did better than the bitter berry and put Ceylon on the world map once again. Few could do without tea, especially Englishmen. And so there we were with the same old bushes of tea surrounding us whenever we rode up hill country. Mother would explain to us that it was only two leaves and a little bud that was used for making the black tea our country was so famous for and we would lend her our ears rather half-heartedly.

One night while driving upcountry mother looked up and saw a flare in the heavens; it was a shooting star streaking across the dark sky, and she quickly pointed it out, but we could not as much as catch a glimpse of it. Even if we had it would not have impressed us. She could have at least spiced it up a bit, like telling us that hoary old Arabian belief held that these were the stones by which the angels pelted the jinn who had eavesdropped on the conversations the heavenly hosts were having on the fates of men. But nay, she had not yet mastered the art of winning our hearts. She seemed to be so obsessed with tea and other such trivia we had absolutely no interest in.

There were certainly much more interesting topics to talk about when on an adventure like this. For instance about the famous outlaw Saradiel whose mountainous hideout of Utuvankanda or Castle Rock near Kegalle father would point out to us while on the road to Nuwara Eliya, informing us that they called him Ceylon's Robin Hood because he waylaid the wealthy and distributed the loot to the needy. "*Robbing from the rich and giving to the poor. Is that a good thing or a bad thing ?*" he would ask us. Now, that was a difficult question to answer and so we kept mum, leaving dad to brood over it.



Utuwankanda or Castle Rock, the haunt of Saradiel

Little did we know it then, but Saradiel's victims were Moorish merchants plying uphill and downhill in their caravans loaded with merchandise. Strangely, his accomplice Mammalay Marikkar who assisted him in his banditry was also a Moor. The British, staunch enforcers of law and order in the tradition of the Sheriff of Nottingham eventually tracked them down and hanged them at Gallows Hill in Kandy. The local Robin Hood was perhaps no match for the famous English outlaw of Sherwood Forest, whom he is often compared with, but like him lived on in folk memory well after his death, his exploits being told with such relish and flourish by storytellers that one would imagine he were a virile muscular hero in the manner of Hercules or Conan. The real Saradiel in contrast was a rather lean effeminate-looking man - strange indeed for one who leeches off others.

Talking of leeches, we had plenty of them in Nuwara Eliya. The little saradiels swarmed in the glades of certain parts of the town, especially in its outskirts, lying in wait till an unsuspecting stranger rich in red gold came their way, whereupon they would, somersaulting stealthily, fall upon him. We would take care to evade the bloodsuckers by treading ever so briskly or scurrying over the blades of grass or undergrowth

they had made their hideout. The villains had made their presence felt to us rather early in our visits to the place for I remember an occasion when mother once ordered me to put my leech-infested foot into a potty in a house we were staying in, pouring over it some eau de cologne, lime juice or salt to dislodge the blighter.

Stories of the little terrors gorging themselves on human blood to their heart's content till they dropped off, fully sated, the size of a rubber ball, did not make it any easier to allay the lingering fear we would sometimes be seized with when traversing leech-infested territory. Fortunately for us the bloodsuckers did not frequent the more central parts of town where the human population was denser and the wet undergrowth in which they thrived sparser. Nay, here grew taller trees less conducive to their way of life; pinus, cypress and eucalyptus that perfumed the cold air with their mentholated fragrance amidst old English style Tudorbethan houses with gabled roofs and bow and dormer windows. This was no leech country, but one more attuned for an English spring with carefully kept gardens decked with blooms of various hues. Man was master here and he intended to keep it that way.

With time, our visits to Nuwara Eliya became more frequent, especially during the April holidays, the season when Colombo's elite deserted the sun-beaten city with its heat and humidity and beat a hasty retreat to the colder climes of Little England like the colonials of an earlier age did in times like these. Cold it was no doubt, so much so that whenever we went outdoors and huffed and puffed into the heavy air, we could see little gusts of mist-like cold air emerging from our lips, though there were occasions we had to muff our little hands in woolen mittens as the prickly cold almost numbed our fingers, though this was very likely on some very chilly December morn than a more temperate April day.



A Tudorbethan house viewed from Sena Kavikara's bungalow in Glenfall Road, Nuwara Eliya where we spent our first holiday in the upcountry. A recent photo.

But there was an added draw. Nuwara Eliya had by the early 1980s emerged as a popular horse racing destination in the tradition of Ascot in England and father lost no time in throwing in his lot with the Turf Club that had revived it in 1981, taking a number of its stables and filling them with a dark handsome horse and a pack of demure brown ponies. Not that there was any money to be made in it. It was all about winning cups and boasting about it for a year.



Nuwara Eliya Turf Club. A recent photo

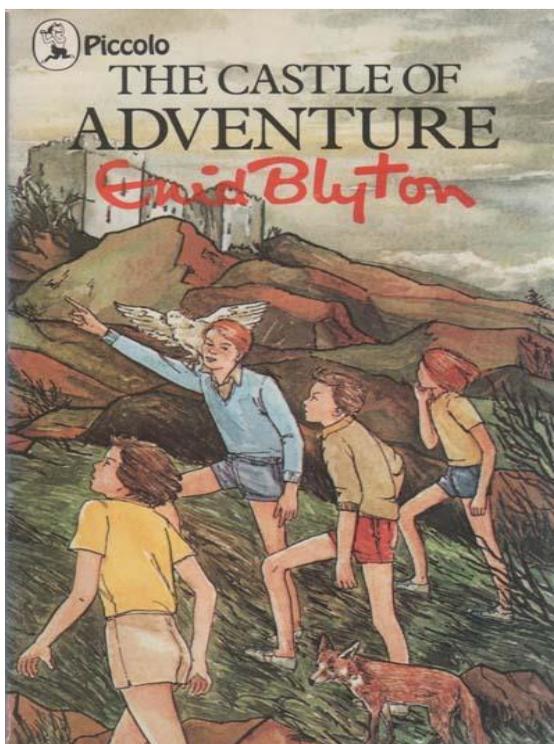
Father's interest in the sport of kings was prompted not just by the opportunity it gave him to hobnob with the local landed elite who owned horses or patronized the sport, but perhaps also a desire, born out of sentiment to revive the faded glory that was once his family's before an earlier regime, roused by nationalist and socialist fervour, clamped down on the sport due to its obvious colonial associations. The last horse race held in Nuwara Eliya had been a decade earlier, in 1971, following a series of measures the government of the day took to kill the sport including a ban on horse imports in 1965. The acquisition of land belonging to the Colombo Racing Course for the Colombo Campus were among other measures that effectively killed the King's Sport in the country.

And so there we were in the horse racing season which happily coincided with the April vacation, lodging in holiday homes, visiting the stables and walking the turf of the racing course. One of the earliest such chalets we stayed in was called *The Prairie* in whose spacious lawn we would, at eventide, shoot up a toy helicopter one of us received as a gift. Strolling around, we could not help but notice the distinct vegetation of these colder climes like the neat rows of blue-green cabbages growing in hillside gardens.



Father with one of his ponies. Nuwara Eliya Turf Club

When indoors, it was reading that kept us occupied and one such book I recall taking along with me was Enid Blyton's *The Castle of Adventure* which told the story of a bunch of kids Jack, Phillip, Dinah and Lucy-Ann on holiday in the Scottish highlands who solved the mystery of a castle perched high up in the mountains. The book made wonderful reading, given the mountainous setting of the story with its grand castellated rock, especially in a place like Nuwara Eliya nestled high up in the hills, so much so that there were times I would be lost in thought wishing I was there with that adventurous foursome, perhaps even as one of them.



*Castle of Adventure. I have since lost the book.
This one's from the Internet*

The stables where our hoofed friends were housed we also visited on occasion. The horse, a thoroughbred of an almost black colour was a rather tall sturdy fellow who seemed to have this bad habit of looking down on us. The steed, originally called *Sita Jaya* was renamed *Diasis* by father after the famous American racehorse of that name.



Hussein boys with Dad's horsey, Nuwara Eliya Ealy 1980s

Asgar had suggested the name *Black Bullet* and father quite impressed with it even seriously considered using it. He had purchased the horse from millionaire industrialist Upali Wijewardane, it is said *for a song* as the magnate, in order to encourage the sport here, imported horses and sold them at a very low price for any takers. He nevertheless kept the best for himself, including among others *Kandos Man*, *Cornwall Garden* and *King of Zulu* who won many a race.

The more demure brown ponies including one named *Alties Girl* after little brother Altaf were not as impressive but were nevertheless a thoroughly spoiled lot. One, perhaps a health

freak, even refused to eat a carrot it had seen falling on to the ground when one of us kids attempted to feed it for the first time, obviously with trembling hands. The finicky fellow would not as much as take a nibble however much we tried to pass it down its throat. Animals too can be conscious of their health.



Father's pet Altaf on ponyback after a race at Nuwara Eliya Turf Club. He had a pony named after him called 'Alties Girl'

Father could obviously not afford to lodge his ponies in the stables at Nuwara Eliya for long, and so when the racing season was over, he would have them banished to his seaside resort, Sihina Beach Village where they would entertain his foreign guests offering them rides on their backs, accompanied by our regular jockey Farook. A humble, small-made fellow with a swarthy complexion and an odd squint, Farook was the son of the family horsekeeper Ramalan who had so faithfully served our great grandmother Rukiya in her horse-riding school. In keeping with family tradition, he served father well and wished we would also have him, for I remember the

usually jocund chap seeming rather sentimental one night after having accompanied us into a cabana in Kosgoda where we were to stay during a vacation, inquiring whether we would look after him the way father did when we grew up.

And when the big day came it was one grand show at the circular race course. We could see from the stand the sleek swift-footed steeds racing against one another, till, taking the curve, they disappeared into the distance, only to make their appearance once more while the crowds cheered. Most of the races, needless to say, were won by the steeds owned by Upali Wijewardene, though there were occasions when our Diasis came close to the cup.

However, galloping to glory on a horse was no easy task as father would find out. Upali, a tycoon whose vast business empire included aviation, chocolates and newspapers and who had been instrumental in reviving horse racing in the country mysteriously disappeared when the Learjet in he was traveling went missing in early 1983 somewhere off the islands of the Indonesian archipelago. With him the sport lost its greatest benefactor. The dull economic climate that followed in the wake of the ethnic riots in mid-1983 only made matters worse. This was further complicated by the disappointing performance of Sihina Beach Village which was going from bad to worse as tourist arrivals plummeted due to the terrorist threat that followed in the wake of the riots.

Father, seeing the writing on the wall, quickly gave up on his equestrian antics, selling or gifting his steed and ponies and calling it quits. It had cost him dear and never again would he entertain the idea of owning a horse.

Down South

Sri Lanka's southern coast, with its lustrous golden beaches fringed on one side with feathery ashen palms that dance to the winds and flanked on the other by blue-green waters grizzled by the waves never fails to enamour visitors..

Our earliest visits to the south were to Brown's Hill in the outskirts of Matara, a well known town in the southern coastal belt. Brown's Hill itself was a scenic residential area dotted with a few houses with spacious gardens which could be approached by little lanes and walkways branching off from Beach Road. Here it is said stood the airy bungalows of the old colonials strategically placed to capture the sea breeze blowing in from the south. The place obviously had colonial associations, judging by the appellation given to it, Brown's Hill – an elevated area named after Englishman John Brown, an able administrator of the region.

Here lived grandaunt Haseena who was known to our father's family as 'Amy' but to us as 'Matara aunty'. The house in which she lived with her husband, Proctor Anwar and five children, by then all grown up, had a lovely little lane leading to it that branched off from Beach Road.



Haseena aunty & family outside house at Brown's Hill, Matara

It also had a spacious garden girdling it on all sides. Here thrived a variety of flora including a strapping cashewnut tree whose apple-like fruits we loved nibbling as squirrels do. In its backyard were coconut palms and a prolific passionfruit creeper that climbed on to a tall tamarind tree, so high that none dare go up but tarry till the yellowish fruits fell onto the ground looking quite wizened.

Our first visit to the place was when we were a couple of years old, in the mid 1970s. It stands out as a memorable visit not for me who could not remember even a frame of it, but for an unsavoury incident that many in that house would recall like a roll of film even more than three decades later.

That was when a distant kinswoman of theirs walked out when mother was invited for lunch, muttering that a *Sinhalatti* (Sinhalese woman) would not share the table with her, a ‘Muslim’ woman. The fussy even frowned upon seeing the only daughter of the house, Faizoona fondling bonny baby Altaf, later going on to comment at the house of a man named Hajjar Appa that she had seen the girl carrying a *Sinhala-kutti* (Sinhalese child). Such racist drivel, though anathema to Islam, one may occasionally find dribbling from the mouths of the unlettered members of the community who in the rabid fervour of ignorance cannot distinguish religion from race any more than they could tell right from wrong.

The telltale never had it good, for her own son got hitched to a Burgher girl, prompting Faizoona to comment when they arrived for a religious function at the Grand Mosque in Matara known as the *Burda Kanduri* that not only had the lad married a *Parangi* (Portuguese, meaning Burgher) girl, but that he had also brought with him a *Parangi* child. Tit for tat, nay worse, for the term she chose to employ, *Parangi*, was by no means a respectable term in Muslim circles even to refer to the Burghers who are more properly *Lansi* or Dutch descendants. On the other hand, *Parangi* (a corruption of *Frank*, the Germanic tribe that gave its name to France) literally meant ‘Portuguese’, the sworn enemies of the island’s Muslims in days gone by, not to mention that it was also the name of a

disease the Portuguese are believed to have introduced to the country.

The ill feeling was still quite strong in Matara, where it is said that the Lusitanian conquistadors, in the manner of the crusaders of old, ruthlessly wiped out the Muslim populace of the town as they suspected them to be in league with their Dutch foes, slaying the men and enslaving the women and children. The Portuguese of those days, unlike the relatively peaceful inhabitants of Lusitania today, were a bloodthirsty lot who had scant respect for the teachings of Christ. The grudge they bore against the local Muslims was twofold. For one thing, they regarded them as their foes in faith; for another they considered them to be rivals in trade, for it were the Muslims who stood in the way of the Portuguese monopolizing the island's lucrative trade, especially in spices such as cinnamon.



Uncle Akhter as a schoolboy at Brown's Hill Beach

My earliest recollection of the place was in the days leading to aunt Faizoon's wedding to uncle Najimudeen which was held, as was the usual Muslim custom then, at the bride's house. So there we were, almost our entire paternal clan, lumbering in hackeries, hooded carts on two wheels hitched to a trotting bullock or two, trailing one after another like a wild west wagon train, from Matara town to Brown's Hill. I wonder how we got to the town in the first place. It had to be by train and not by car, or else there would have been no reason to take the hackeries from the town unless of course the ladies preferred a fancy ride on the bullocks.



Aunt Faizoon on her wedding day with father, mother and their three brats celebrated at the bride's house in Matara

Those were the days when Matara town had a fleet of hackeries to cater to the transport needs of locals in the absence of the costlier cabs, yellow-topped, black-bodied Morris Minors that served the more commercial parts of the country such as Colombo in the late 70s before the Bajaj three-wheelers from India invaded the country, in the process

displacing both the dearer four wheeler and the cruder two wheeler, signs of a burgeoning middle class.

The morning the wedding was to take place saw countless fowls being slaughtered for the feast to be held that night. We kids would watch the bloody proceeding outside the house wide-eyed as the slaughterer did his job with precision, deftly slicing their throats with a sharp knife so that the blood spurted out and their feathery bodies went into convulsions, a consequence no doubt of the muscles contracting as a result of blood loss, before they fell dead near his feet.

Though this might strike one as rather gruesome, the fowl do not experience pain except for the quick cut at the carotid artery which immediately deprives their little brains of blood, and at the jugular vein which prevents the blood from the head going back to the heart. The contractions take place after this and in no way reflect the actual pain suffered by the creature.

The job done, the fowl would be plucked and prepared for the feast that night while the oocytes, the little round eggs of the hens comprising the yolk but sans the albumen and the white calcified coating that characterizes laid eggs, would be reserved for a repast the following day, being cooked as a curry, yellowish, rubbery balls varying in size from a ping pong ball to a marble, sitting atop a spicy brown gravy and served in dainty dishes for breakfast.

By eventide the wedding house had become a hive of activity and there we were, the three of us, dressed for the occasion, Asgar and I in bluish safari suits and Altaf in a brownish military kit with a beret neatly perched on his little noddle. And there in the main hall, which was the front portion of the house, was seated the bride, like a princess, arrayed in all her finery, upon a florid bridal throne known as *istaad*, and beside her was her prince charming who had been led there by the bride's kinsfolk. Local Muslim tradition demands that the bride be seated on the dais for some time before the bridegroom is led to her and takes his seat beside hers, a nuptial custom believed to symbolically stress the dignity of the man of the occasion, for the bride waits, as if pining for

him, and not the other way about as in the western tradition where the man stands while the bride is ceremonially led to him by her father.

The bride as usual was pretty and winsome and her man tall and handsome. Aunt Faizoonah whom everybody addressed as *Ukku Nona* (a Sinhala word meaning 'milk-lady') was the fairest of them all; little doubt the most beautiful damsel in all Matara. Fair of face and form she had a grace which few other women could match, for her well chiseled features and slender figure so lithe and lissom strikingly stood out from all those ladies around her. Indeed she was the kind of woman one ought not to behold without uttering the benedictory formula *Masha Allah* (As God Wills) to ensure that the effects of one's evil eye would not despoil her feminine allure.



Uncle Naji in his bright red Fez fixes the savadi marriage necklet on aunt Faizoonah on their wedding day

Her man was her match in every possible way, for uncle Naji as always was good looking with a charm and elegance few other men could match. He looked quite European really with a tall stature and fair complexion, not to mention his blue-grey eyes which mother thought was a throwback to some remote Dutch ancestor. The man was a scion of a fairly respectable family with roots in the coastal town of Galle not far from Matara where the Dutch colonists had a strong presence, as seen for instance in the magnificent fort they built which stands to this day retaining all its old world charm with its high ramparts, belt of battlements and phallus-shaped barbicans.

Many were the occasions we visited the house on Brown's Hill, especially during the school holidays, and there were times we were joined by father's kinsfolk including on one occasion which lasted for about a week or so by father's cousin Fatima who was almost our age; a year or two older maybe, but still a fine playmate despite her gender. With her we would often walk the narrow, slightly winding lane that led uphill from Beach Road to Brown's Hill.

The place teemed with creepy crawlies of various kinds. Once while resting in an airy bedroom in the afternoon I espied a yellowish snake gliding along a rafter on the roof and rushed to tell grandaunt about it. She casually dismissed it as a harmless *gerandia*, a ratsnake common in those parts. When we inquired whether the story of the *ahatullas*, the green vine snakes going for the eyes was true, she brusquely brushed it aside, assuring us they were inoffensive creatures. These slim snakes used to frequent the guava trees around the house, blending beautifully with its leaves so that one could hardly make them out from a distance.

However she could not brook the *polongas*, the venomous Russel's vipers whose odour she said resembled that of the green bug when crushed. One she spotted coiled under her rose bushes in front of her house she promptly dispatched with some sort of iron bludgeon in our full view and oblivious to what we kids might think of it.

Though we did not come across cobras in our time, the place had crawled with them not long before. The people of the outlying areas did not kill cobras, but rather tossed them into an earthen pot and brought them to the roadside near Brown's Hill. Here they smashed the pots to release the cobras who would swiftly glide into the wild tract of land by the road. Fortunately the family kept a watchdog named Carlo with a long muzzle like that of a mongoose. It dispatched several cobras before it was stung by one hiding near a Cannas bed. It died within an hour or so after going blue in the muzzle and frothing from its mouth.

The sprawling backyard of the place overgrown with Coconut and King Coconut palms was also a good breeding ground for critters of various descriptions. Once when I had cultivated this fascination for fungi, I brought home a very large white mushroom I found growing on a tree stump there, only to find a spooky centipede coiled inside it. The stowaway had probably decided it would be better off in our backyard than in its hostile abode back there under the prying eyes of folk like our Matara Aunty who wished its kind no good.

Even when the dead of night fell here, one could still find in the environs obvious traces of life, for moving briskly in the gloom of the unlit nocturnal garden facing the house were fireflies flitting about like little fairies, flashing their lights so brazenly that one would think that Venus consumed by some unquenchable ardour was taking the plunge towards earth spurning the astral lights around her. Though it seemed as if they had turned their lights on to find their way in the dark, the sirens were actually looking for mates, their yellow green lights serving as a sort of Morse code to solicit prospective males. So fascinated were we with the nymphos that we even discussed the possibility of capturing a few of them and putting them into an empty jam bottle to produce a bioluminescent lamp. Needless to say, capturing the critters was no easy task as they would flash their light before melting into the night at our approach, only to be seen some distance

away flashing their lights again as if to say *catch me if you can!*



Fireflies in the Night. A book that inspired us to bottle fireflies

And when uncle Firoze, who was the most learned of the lot, joined us, it was also an opportunity for learning; many were the occasions we benefited from his rich store of knowledge, even when it came to something as seemingly trivial as protesting against a child chewing a piece of old newspaper. For said he, the ink used in it might well contain lead from the type, which could, when ingested, seep through the bloodstream and reach the head. After all, had not the lunacy of a good many Romans in the decadent days of their rot been attributed to the plumbum piping their water passed through ?

One morning while strolling along the beach not far from Brown's Hill with our learned uncle we noticed this cylindrical lingus-like creature. That, he pointed out, was a sea-slug, a *beche-de-mer*, adding that some people ate the critters, which we fondly imagined was lightly fried in oil like a sausage sizzling in the pan. The fact however is that the creatures, once a well known export commodity from Ceylon to Singapore and Penang, are dried for preserving before finding their way into

costly Chinese soups that are considered something of a delicacy.



Sea slug. A recent picture

The specimen we saw was possibly the last of the sea slugs of the area. Although common in the 1960s they had dwindled over the years. The mudskippers abounding near the rocks below a large bungalow by the sea had also disappeared by that time. A couple of decades earlier, when the Anvar boys and their sister resorted to the spot to catch colourful ornamental fish, these thick-skinned slimy brown critters which jumped like frogs in and out of the sea to alight on the rocks would get caught in their little net much to their annoyance.

Strolling down the beach one morning joined by a larger group of kinsfolk from both the Anwar and Ghany clans we came across a strange, and to our young minds, a rather eerie sight, for in a cove of some sort, quite cut off from the rest of the beach by some natural formations, was the bloated carcass of a large cow. How it got there seemed a mystery at first, though we reasoned that it would have fallen off some overpass above the Nilwala river which then took it to sea. It

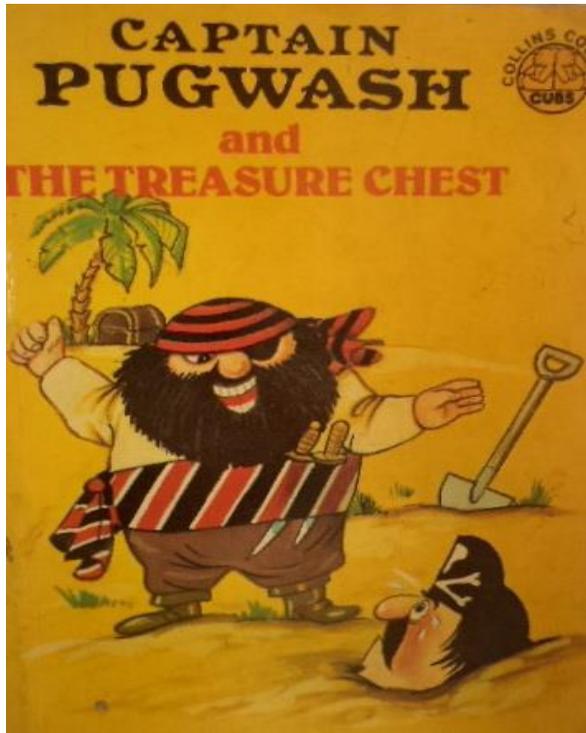
had to be dead well before it hit the sea since only a bloated bovine could float on water and get washed ashore. There were sea-horses certainly, but no sea-cows we knew of. In later times, when the JVP uprising erupted in the late 1980s, the corpses and skeletons of youth suspected to be JVPers could be seen strewn all over this spot of beach, obviously killed by vigilante groups before been dropped into the river.

An all too familiar sight which often piqued our curiosity was this little island in the sea. *Parai Doowa* or Pigeon's Island it was called after the myriads of pigeons from the town that went there to roost at night. It was earlier known as *Poulier's Island*, after a Burgher gentleman of that name, George Poulier who owned it at one time, and still earlier as *Tate's Island*.



Pigeon's island in Matara. A recent picture

It then seemed so quiet and distant, worthy perhaps of a treasure hunt, for who knows, hidden somewhere yonder might be a chest worth a king's ransom just like the one Captain Pugwash - one of our better known story characters - buried in an island which looked very similar to Pigeon's Island, in as much as it was depicted in a little story book we had, *Captain Pugwash and the Treasure Chest* by Collins Colour Cubs.



Our Captain Pugwash book still with me

It would eventually be converted into a Buddhist monastic site visited by throngs of pilgrims who headed to the islet not by boat but by means of a bridge, recently built, that connected it to the mainland.

Dream Village

Tourism was booming in the early 1980s. That was before the ethnic riots of July 1983 and the scourge of terrorism unleashed by the Tamil Tigers that followed in its wake for nearly three decades. Needless to say, the industry, hinging as it did on the tranquil image the country portrayed to holidaymakers, suffered terribly as a result of the war.

Prior to 1983 Sri Lanka was a peaceful country that had all the ingredients for a successful tourism industry- friendly people, golden sun-kissed beaches and a rich and diverse culture. Foreign tourists, especially from countries like Germany had begun to stream in and increased in numbers over the years, especially in the wake of the liberalization of the economy in 1977. Supply catered to the demand and many saw an opportunity to cash in on the upswing by setting up tourist hotels and resorts. Father happened to be one of these aspiring entrepreneurs of a new order.

The auctions were doing well and now was the time for empire, beginning with a foray into that burgeoning and very happening industry of the day-tourism. But father in his characteristically unconventional style wanted to do it differently. Foreign tourists, he figured, had seen enough of concrete hotels and longed for something more natural. It could not cost dear though. He did not have the kind of money the bigwigs had.

What better way to house our dear visitors from overseas, he thought, than in the most natural looking houses one could think of - cabanas made of coconut thatch and straw, so archetypally primitive that one might easily imagine Adam and Eve living in one. Before long, father had set about achieving his dream, becoming in a sense, the pioneer of eco-tourism in our country. That was in 1980, well before anybody else in our little island ever thought of such a unique concept.

He could n't have got a better piece of land for building his dreams upon than the beachfront stretch at Mahapalaena, Kosgoda in the South Western coastline he purchased from a

local. Abutting Galle Road at the 44th mile post, the plot was idyllically situated between two ancient rocks, the Naya Endu Gala to the South and Arangala to the North, offering a relatively secluded almost virgin beach extending about 400 yards to the left and an equal distance to the right, from which point it was cut off by the two large rocky outcrops, one of which almost kissed the sea and the other which actually jutted into the sea, giving an impression of a bay.

Here he set about building fourteen beach cabanas with the help of the man who had sold him the land, an influential chap from the area known as Thomson. About ten to fifteen village hands supervised by a kinsman of Thomson named Jagath were put to work and within as little as three months these hardy men of the Haali caste had put up over a dozen of the cabanas from material sourced from the area including dry woven coconut leaves for the walls and *Alastonia* wood obtained from a tree known locally as *Ginikooru gas* (matchstick trees) as supports for the high sloping roofs. The roofs themselves were made of woven coconut leaves which were covered over with straw obtained from the paddy fields of Induruwa. The stretch of land surrounding the cabanas was carpeted with green grass that came as clumps from the interior while the flimsy fence that served as a barrier between the cabanas and the roadway was made of cinnamon wood and bamboo sticks laid out in criss-cross fashion.

The cabanas were set in two rows of seven each with a pathway in the middle whose entrance was lit at night by a couple of old incandescent ornamental lanterns on high white stands that gave out lambent light - an almost fairy tale setting. Natural light here shone even at night, for near each cabana were placed what were known as *Bunker Lamps*, a hardy lamp with a thick wick made of gunny sack fibre whose flame was fed by kerosene, so resilient that it could be used even while fishing in storm tossed waters. Also hung inside each cabana was some sort of hurricane lantern known locally as *Herikal Lampu* with a glass covering inside of which burnt a flame fed again with kerosene. A vintage car, dark green in colour and

beautifully painted with a scene of the resort, and an old man-drawn rickshaw added further beauty to the spot. To cap it all, on the southern end overlooking the vast Indian Ocean, he put up a lovely circular restaurant- the crown of the resort.



Old advertisement in a local tourist magazine. Early 1980s

Father aptly called his dream resort *Sihina Beach Village*, from the Sinhala word *sihina* meaning ‘dream’. In fact, a handout in German billed it as a ‘*Traum-Dorf*’ (Dream Village) and proudly quoted what a German tourist guide on his first visit to the resort had written about it to a friend, perhaps subjected to a bit of poetic embellishment: “*This dream village by the beach is wonderful, a first of its kind in Sri Lanka. You can throw yourself in extreme peace and privacy to the tanning rays of the bright sun on the golden sands of the clean virgin beach. The village faces the beautiful blue sea, cool and calm. You can also dine in a rustic restaurant overlooking the mighty Indian Ocean. The seafood here is excellent. At night the music of the waves drives you to a deep sleep for which this romantic place is most unforgettable*”.

Our visitors were no doubt happy doing time in these *first of its kind* one-roomed cells with attached bathroom. The breeze from the sea wafting through the doorway or the movable thatched window on the high sloping roof ensured they got plenty of fresh air. Imbuing further life to the resort were father's five or six ponies including a beautiful white pony which he raced in Nuwara Eliya, but which at other times were stationed here under the care of a jockey named Farook. This dark podgy fellow with a squint lived with the rest of the resort staff in a little house opposite the cabanas, on the other side of the Galle Road and would take resident tourists for a ride on the ponies around the little beach village.



Frau Gertrude at Sihina beach village in front of Baby Austin

There were quite a few regular visitors to our little village by the sea. One was a German brunette named Gertrude who sallied forth from her fatherland during the winter season to be here, sometimes accompanied by her son and his wife and grandson David, a bubbly little fellow a few years younger to us. This happy family introduced to us a few Western fads

including that delicious chocolate and hazelnut spread called *Nutella* and jellied fruity chews that came in various shapes and colours. We were quite fascinated by these white families basking under the tropical sun and even wondered whether not the sand in those countries was like our sea sand, lighter in colour than our brown soils that seemed to match the skin colour of a good many of our locals. We might as well have pondered whether not the blonds on the beach got their gold locks lounging under the sun so long as to bleach their hair to a sunny hue.



With mother and Frau Gertrude in the old hackery or rickshaw

We also had our share of eccentricities. In one of our earliest visits to the resort, we learned one night that a resident tourist had made a hue and cry about a monster in his cabana. *Big, big*, he had described the brute, excited and animated. Upon investigation the blighter was found to be a mere cockroach probably on the lookout for a mate with wings outstretched.

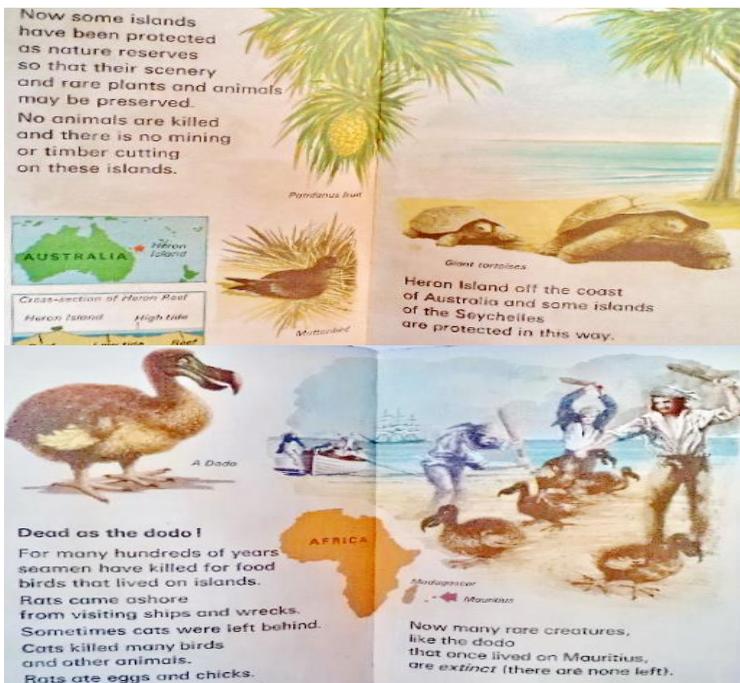
But it was not only our overseas visitors who enjoyed staying here. We too loved it and often visited our dream village over the weekends or in the holidays, sometimes taking with us our

favourite story books like our bumper *Richard Scarry's* and *Sesame Street* books which we enjoyed reading under the shade of the *Pandanus* trees that grew near the cabanas, with their hydra-like candelabrum branches and reddish orange pineapple-like fruit hanging like strange ornamental lanterns.



A foreign couple by the beach with our cabanas and pandanus tree in the background which gave the place an exotic look

Interestingly a little book we took to our beach village, a Ladybird hardback on *Islands* even had a picture of the Pandanus fruit we were so familiar with besides other scenes characteristic of island beaches such as giant turtles and sailors on the beach bludgeoning to death those big birds known as Dodos that once lived in the island of Mauritius but are now extinct, an episode that gave rise to the English simile *As Dead as a Dodo* and may even well be the origin of a little known local word *Doedoo* meaning crazy or stupid.



Scenes from our Ladybird book on islands still in my care

The lure of the sea right in front of our little village was too strong to resist and there we were morning and evening taking a dip in the ocean as the rolling waves came tumbling down with a roar, bathing the shore with water and foam. There were occasions we ventured further out to sea but only when equipped with the orange-coloured inflatables the resort stocked itself with for the use of foreigners to beat the billows. We reasoned that the gear, which bobbed with the waves, would keep us afloat even if we were dragged out to deep sea, giving ample time for a grown-up to rescue us from the clutches of the ocean or the sea demon known as *diya-rakusa* who would have been lurking nearby. When we were safely back on terra firma, we would build sand castles, moulding with our little hands the sodden sea sand.



Husseins and Karu cousins seabathe in front of Sihina Beach Village. Father with inflatables looking like the Hulk

The circular restaurant was the centerpiece of the resort. A good part of it was open to the breeze as it was only the lower portion that was walled with the roof capped with straw.



Mother and three little clowns at the circular restaurant

It served some appetizing meals such as fish and chips, lobster, prawns and even barbequed meats on occasion, much of it prepared in the attached kitchen by a local hand named Sarath, the *kokiya* (regular cook) of the restaurant who doubled as the gardener, tending the little flower gardens near the cottages. It was here that much of the mingling took place. Foreign guests played games and talked sweet nothings. Father invited friends and family over for the weekend or a brief vacation. He even hosted uncle Nazir and his wife Adilah for lunch after their wedding in keeping with the local Muslim custom of *virundu*, a repast given in honour of the newly married couple. The luncheon was attended by both their extended families and concluded with father mounting his pet son Altaf on his white pony and sending him off on the stretch of beach between the sea and village. It took off, throwing its rider on to the soft golden sea sand. It was father's little cousin Fatima who saved the day by joining him on the beach to build a multi-tiered sand castle that got progressively smaller as it rose upwards.



Sand castles at Kosgoda Beach. A recent photograph

Among other notable visitors to the place were father's old friend Mutthiah Devaraj, a well known national cricketer and his Sinhalese wife Neela, one Doctor Vamadevan and another Doctor Wijenayagam and their families and of course Uncle Karunagaran, aunt Sunethra and their three children Rajiv, Kumeshi and Mirukshi with whom we had the fortune of sea bathing and playing on the beach in those balmy days of peace. Karu uncle, as we called their father, had made for his two daughters, still not quite grown up, little bikinis of cloth. So impressed was cousin Kumeshi with the place that she thought her Hussein kinsfolk were very, very rich. Little did she realize that our resort by the sea was not a very costly affair and a far cry from the big hotels of the time.



Hussein boys and cousins, Karu girls at Sihina Beach Village

Our frequent visits to the place and somewhat long stays brought us closer to the thriving marine life of the area. It was after a very early visit to the place that I brought home a rather bumpy pale brown starfish. It had probably been taken from a rock pool low down on the shore or given to me by a fisherman who had hauled it up from the seabed with his catch of lobsters. It may have already been dead as it did not move an inch, but taking it to be alive I brought it home and kept it in a basin of water, only to find a couple of days later that it was giving out a rather bad smell. I took it for dead and put it away. Little did I know it then, but starfish need salinity to survive so that the water from our bathroom into which I had so innocently placed it could have actually killed it.

Sometime later during a longer holiday I found the beachhead invaded by an armada of Portuguese man-o-war.

These were jellyfish-like creatures of the sea with a lucent cock's comb-like sail floating on the surface of the water; they were also armed with stringy bluish tentacles whose sting could kill or paralyze little fish. They came, riding on the back of the billows in droves, but were initially imperceptible as they blended beautifully with the water with a camouflage even a modern soldier could not match. One fine morning while wading in the waves near the shore, I was stung in the hand by a rather bellicose critter keen on flaunting its arsenal. The sting sent a sharp piercing pulse of pain that reached my arm and lasted for several hours before wearing out. The invasion did not last long and was soon over, never to repeat itself again.



Portuguese man-o-war. I was stung by a critter like this

Sometimes landing on to the shore like castaways were little whitish mussels that clung on to pieces of driftwood that washed up on the beach. The tiny bivalves would stubbornly stick to the wood anchoring themselves by means of some sort of mooring gum.

Turtles also made landfall to lay their eggs in Kosgoda beach. The strip of beach where our resort was located was a favourite rookery for turtle nesting. The shy creatures would find their way to the sandy beach they themselves were born decades earlier for the sole purpose of scooping out a nest with their hind flippers to deposit their eggs, after which they would head back to sea perhaps never to return again. The young ones, when hatched, would instinctively rush to the sea, fanning out to increase their chances of surviving lurking predators. One night father was told that a turtle had made its way to the beachfront a few hundred yards away towards the south to lay her eggs. Taking us along with him, he hurried, torch in hand. From what little I could make out in the dead of night, some men, residents of the area, were stealing the eggs. I gathered that father was not too happy about it judging from the look of his face. It was not only an inhuman thing to do, but turtles were also an endangered species. Unfortunately many of the locals back then did not take conservation too seriously. Turtle eggs were in high demand, especially given the belief that consuming these made one exceedingly strong. It was commonly believed that taking turtle eggs made one's muscles taut and rigid, so much so that if one were given an injection the needle would break.



Father gifts coconuts to tourist for winning a game

Fishermen in their canoes were a common sight then as now since a patch of the beach to the south of our little village served as a sort of mini harbour to put out to sea. One evening we helped haul in a catch of fish caught in a *madel* or seine net. The large net had been cast into the sea by a boat and we joined the men in pulling it back onto the beach in front of our resort. We were rewarded with some fingerlings with yellowish fins, very likely the young of the *Parav* or Trevally which we gifted to our restaurant.



Army boys at the beachhead fronting the traumdorf

While on a long holiday at the resort we noticed one morning that the sea had rushed deep in to the beach, receding and leaving in its wake a large pool of water in a depression in the sea sand. We lost no time wading in the water which was up to knee level or even higher at certain spots. As the water pool got smaller and smaller over time as a result of getting absorbed into the sandy ground and evaporated by the heat of the sun, we noticed this wiggly little fish that had been trapped in the pool and caught it with a bucket. We were quite excited with our catch, especially since it was a beautiful fish with

yellow fins, more like an ornamental fish, though it might have well been a young Trevally. Having taken it back to the resort we were wondering what to do with it, thinking of a way to safely convey it home if possible. That was when saner counsel prevailed, for father, who had a soft spot for dumb creatures like this, bade us take it back to the sea and release it, which we promptly did. It quickly made a dive and was gone.

Also strewn on the beach were countless seashells, cockles, cowries, mussels and topshells, the dead denizens of the ocean the bowels of the sea, unable to digest the calcified remnants, had vomited onto the shore. Particularly charming were the cowries, the remains of sea snails, little humped thick shells with a flat undersurface having a narrow opening at the centre.



Seashells in variety, Kosgoda Beach. A recent photograph

We learnt from a little book on coins we had that these cowries were so dear in the olden days that they were used as currency by certain people. There was also the occasional cuttlebone, the porous calcareous internal shell of the cuttlefish which helps it control its buoyancy and hover above the ocean floor like a submarine.



Cuttlefish bone at Kosgoda beach, a recent photo

The cuttlebones, which looked like mini surfboards, only bright white in colour, we would often pick up in the course of our rambles on the beach before the golden orb of the sun which had already imbued the cerulean sky with a blaze of red and yellow sank into the ocean yonder.

On the coastal stretch to the north of the resort stood a group of black boulders piled one atop the other known as Arangala. The rocky portion closer to the sea was constantly engulfed in water. It was garbed on the lower surface with slimy bright green seaweed and studded further down with prickly sea urchins, living crowns of thorns that revealing themselves at low tide, looked rather like the golliwogs of the stories we read with black spikes sticking out from their equally black bodies, doggedly clinging on to the rock for support and to feast on the smaller aquatic creatures that had found their way there.



Sea urchins of Sri Lanka. The ones I remember looked like this

The folk here harvested the purplish mussels that clung on to these boulders. When boiled these would open like a duck's bill to reveal a lump of edible flesh though whenever we climbed up the rocks we could not find any as they had already been scraped off by local folk who greedily gulped them down or sold them for a fast buck. Here in the rock pools formed by the sea water that cascaded over the dimples in the boulders were little fish that darted hither and thither that we loved to watch but simply could not make a meal of, though bigger fish fit for the table swarmed in the sea nearby. Towards the west, surrounded by shallow seawater were a few more similar rocks crawling with lobsters.



Tourists near Arangala. A recent photograph

To the south of the resort lay another group of black boulders near which a limpid stream from the hinterland emerged to empty its waters into the sea, but not before forming a shallow pool in which we occasionally bathed and frolicked. This pool of water appeared rather like a cul de sac formed by the seawater that found its way there with black brown rocks on almost every side except the western side facing the sea, but actually the water it contained seems to have flowed in from a rivulet known as the Kalugal Oya to its east through a subterranean channel under the Galle Road though seawater at high tide could have also found its way there on occasion. The large red boulder to its south, surrounded below by smaller black rocks was known as Naya Endu Gala or ‘The Rock upon which the Cobra cried’. Legend had it that the rock had been the abode of cobra which lost a gemstone in its possession and cried till it split into two, its blood dripping down the boulder as a large red streak seen to this day.



Naya Endu Gala or Rock Where Cobra Cried. Recent photo

The dream was not to last long, for the nightmare that was war though fought far from the scene now took its place, leaving in its wake a stub of what was once a beautiful little village, the result of the downturn in tourism the island was experiencing in the aftermath of the 1983 riots and father's own disillusionment with the turn of events. Unable even to maintain it, he stripped it off of its more costlier furniture including its lovely antique almirahs and abandoned it to the elements, which within a decade or so had whittled it down to its very foundations, so much so that there would come a time when we would not even be able to make out the spot where it once so proudly stood, all that remains of it now being some old photographs, handouts, advertisements and of course the happy memories it gave us.

Park and Prom

Whatever is said of rustic village life, there is no doubt townies have it better, and none have it as good as Colpetty people. Here is where life is, plentifully pregnant with possibilities to get away from the hustle and bustle of it all. Be it a stroll on the Galle Face Green, a ramble round the Beira Lake, an outing with the family at Vihara Maha Devi Park, shopping at the Liberty Plaza or a visit to the Liberty Cinema, Colpetty folk do not have far to go.

Galle face figured prominently in our outings as it was not very far from home, providing us ample space to gambol about amidst the balmy breeze and sea spray. This large esplanade with a nearly mile-long promenade fronting the Arabian Sea to the West seems originally to have been cleared by the Dutch to give their cannons a clear line of fire to keep away invaders from their prize colony which they called Ceylon.



Galle Face Green. A Recent photograph

The unusual name for the spot Galle Face, however, has Sinhalese antecedents, as it seems to have originated from the Sinhala name *Gal-bokka* or ‘Rocky Bay’ which originally referred to the coastal stretch to its north which was well provided with natural rock. The Portuguese called it *Galle Boca* and the Hollanders who succeeded them, taking the Lusitanian usage to mean ‘mouth’ which in the Portuguese language it actually meant, called it *Galle Faas* or Galle Face which the English adopted, passing it down to us.

The British, whom the big guns of the Dutch could not silence, did much to develop the place as a recreational spot. The Galle Face Walk along the sea-wall, a long promenade about a mile in length was commissioned as far back as 1856 by the Governor of Ceylon Sir Henry Ward in “*the interests of the ladies and children of Colombo*”. Horse races were also held here until about 1892 when the Havelock Racecourse in Cinnamon Gardens took its place. It also became a venue for evening drives, musical bands and even games of Polo, a tradition that died out when the British left our shores.



Benches at Galle Face facing the sea. A recent photograph

Pleasant were the evenings we spent as children on the picturesque turf; frolicking on the patches of grass that carpeted the place and gave it its sobriquet of green, and strolling along the walkway on the sea-wall that faced the lapping waves which then as now swarmed with happy families and merry makers. It was not only our parents who hauled us over to the green, but also our aunts, father's then unmarried sisters who itched for an outing once in a while chaperoned by a brother or two or even us little ones, in stark contrast to their arch conservative mother who preferred to remain at home tending the hearth.

The invariable treat a visit to the green brought was an ice cream cone, and in our very young days we would casually comment to one another about an ice cream van being here or there to get mother's attention, hoping she would get the hint. We would say in a roundabout way "*Hmm, there are a lot of ice cream vans today*". Not to be fooled, she would pretend that she did not hear us as she thought that buying us the cones then and there might spoil us, preferring instead to get us the cones a while after the racket had died down.



Alerics ice cream van outside Picadilly Cafe

The Alerics ice cream vans then parked in the kerb between the road and the green did a brisk business selling cones. Anybody could make them out by their distinctive logo which had the word *Alerics* in red capped by a snow white layer as if topped with ice cream. We were almost always bought vanilla, our parents' preferred flavour which they foisted on us as well. At the time Alerics was the leading ice cream manufacturer in the country. Established by Alerics De Silva it rose to great heights in the 1960s and 70s, and even set up the country's first ice cream parlour, *Picadilly Café* in Wellawatte, an exclusive hang-out patronized by Colombo's upper crust.

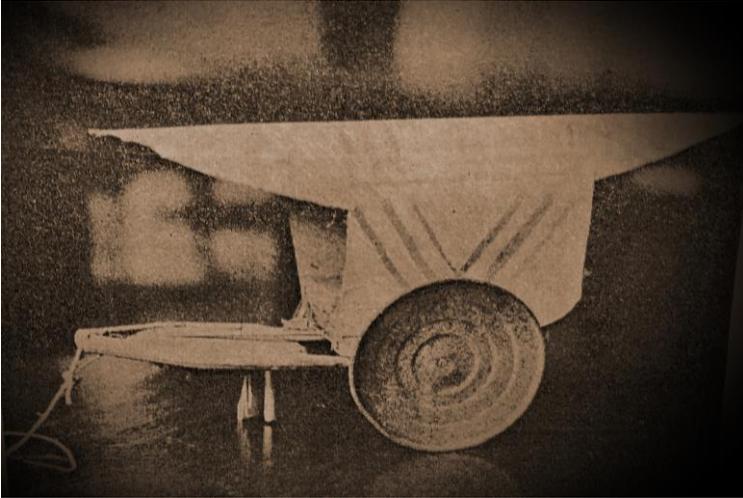
The area nearer the sea wall was occupied by a few see-through hand-pushed carts with glass windows which with sundown would be lit with glowing lamps or lanterns, displaying an array of crunchy savoury snacks like cassava chips loved by both kids and grown ups.



Hand pushed carts with street food were a common feature in Galle Face then as now

Also plying their trade here were small-time vendors peddling their wares-*tinkiri karatta*, miniature toy carts craftily turned out of discarded tins of condensed milk that when trundled about with a string gave out a rattling *tuck tuck* sound, and red

or multi-coloured paper flowers made of wax paper that rested on a pin fastened to a stalk and whirled with the breeze like a little windmill.



Toy cart made of tinkiri tins that gave out a sound when moved

Kite flying was another popular pastime at Galle Face and many were those who found their way to the green just to show off their rustling paper belles. These would dance, caressed by the lusty winds wafting from the waves to the west, sometimes with such ecstasy that their masters had a hard time keeping a grip on the line that bound them, as if trying to hold on to a dog gone mad on the leash. Kites galored then as now at the green and even national kite festivals where kites of all shapes and sizes vied with one another for beauty and grace were held there annually. There were the usual diamond shaped ones made of oil paper and bamboo pieces and the longer serpentine ones that billowed in the breeze.

Even the veil of night here could not hide its charms, for the wide expanse of star-spangled sky the esplanade opened out to at nightfall seemed as if the celestial vault so manifest in the day like an ethereal dome had been split asunder to reveal a

planetarium of sorts. Lying on one's back on the grass, spreadeagled, as father often did, one could gaze at the nightly heaven in all its splendour with countless little stars twinkling high above that simply refused to melt into the night. Distinct and aloof they stood in all their arrogance as if looking down on us puny earthlings.

One such occasion when we paid the green a nocturnal visit was when we tagged along with mother, her auction assistant Zameen and her young nephew Afzal who was about our age. Having seated ourselves on the grass under a starlit sky, Afzal, the great storyteller he was, regaled us with a fascinating tale from the film *Star Wars*, and all this well before it actually showed on the big screen here. We would listen to him with wide, intent, open eyes, for it all seemed so real under that stellar setting.



We first heard about Star Wars at Galle Face

Even in much later times, when we were growing up, and in our early teens, Galle Face kept its charm, like when we walked all the way to the spot when we heard a group called the *Bootleg Beatles*, a tribute band of the Beatles, was in town

and playing near a leading hotel overlooking the green. Though we could not afford the tickets, we found our way to the green, the three of us, and stood that night on the kerb of the green by the Galle Road pricking our ears to catch their music, the strains of which we could make out at a distance. It was not just the music, but the feel of it all, the ambience, however superficial it were, of reliving the days when the Beatles were at their peak in the 1960s, long before we were even born.

Another interesting feature of the green were the battery of grand old cannons towards the north with their huge barrels aimed at the sea, as if some sea monster were lurking nearby. These were probably mounted by the British artillery replacing the older guns the Dutch had installed at the site to keep their maritime enemies, including the Brits at bay.



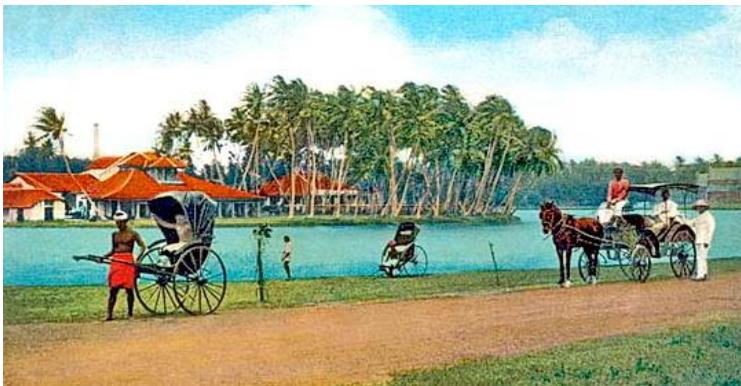
Canons at Galle Face. A recent photograph

And then there was Victoria Park, which we called by that name, despite its having been renamed Vihara Maha Devi Park well before our time. The park, originally called the Circular Park after its shape had been renamed Victoria Park to

commemorate the British Queen's Golden Jubilee in 1887 at the same time no doubt boosting the crone's already inflated ego, ruling as she did, an empire on which the sun never set. The park was renamed again in the 1950s after the mother of the well known Sinhalese national hero Dutugemunu, Vihara Maha Devi who lived around the 2nd century BC, reflecting an upsurge in nationalist sentiment at the time. We stuck to the Victorian name as our elders did.

Here we resorted to every once in a while with our grandma, *Accha* and our duo of spinster aunts, Nandani and Chandani, walking all the way as it was a very short distance from home. True, the park had many things to boast, but it were the swings that attracted us the most, and I remember swinging to and fro with such force that there were moments I thought I would go under the board through a 360 degree course. Among the other interesting features of the park was a tree house built of wood, prettily perched atop a sturdy tree, a tall tower-like matslide which one climbed from the inside as well as a gigantic tortoise made of concrete upon whose back we would sit.

And then there was the Beira Lake, which like many other landmarks in the city had colonial antecedents. It seems to have been known since Portuguese times, since the very name *Beira* itself means in the Portuguese language 'brink or bank of water'.



Lake Road in the olden days

It covered a much larger area in the olden days and even had an island where Negro slaves were housed by the Dutch colonialists after being ferried across the lake after their day's work, a shameful past still reflected in the place name *Slave Island* given to the Colombo 2 Ward. It got a better reputation in early British times when pleasure barges, skiffs and ferry boats operated by the Boustead Brothers sailed the lake and overflowing families picnicked on its grassy banks.



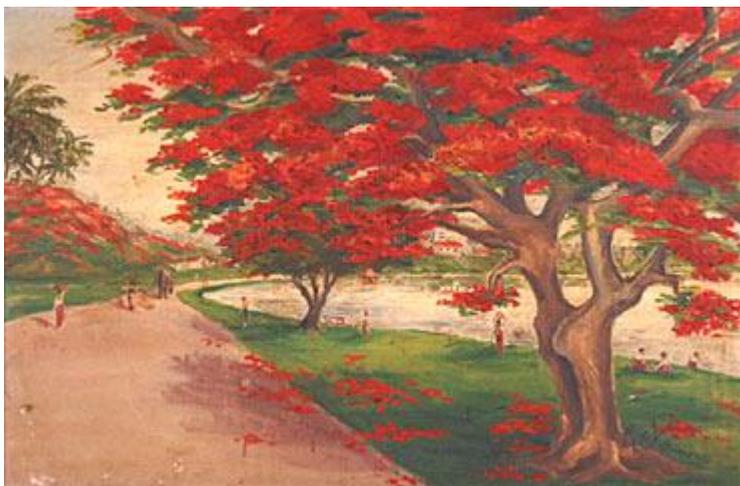
Beira lake and island. A recent photograph

A part of the lake formed a body of water close to our two family homes much like a gigantic pond. Unhappily, it had turned a sickly bilious green. This abomination father thought was the work of mercenary firms that had introduced it with the ulterior motive of getting government contracts to clean up the mess. His theory could have met its match with the one that held that the scourge was introduced by the British in the days of World War II to camouflage the lake so that Jap planes sent

to bomb the city would not be able to identify the spot at night. Needless to say, both hold no water. The lake had simply been overgrown with blue green algae that fed on the wastes dumped by the shanties near its banks.

Shanties then flourished on both sides of the lake, in the Navam Mawatha area, which is today a thriving commercial quarter famed for plush business offices, and in the area of Perahera Mawatha which was then occupied by about a hundred shanties made of timber. It was called *koriyava* (Korea) on account of its many closely built dwellings, but not for long. A fire around 1980 swept through the entire area and within as little as an hour had reduced the wooden huts to charcoal and ashes. Its residents, who had begun squatting in the area a few decades earlier when a portion of the lake facing the present Jansz Playground was filled and had gained notoriety as thugs and prostitutes, were relocated and the wide roadway today known as Perahera Mawatha built.

All this was a far cry from the balmy inter-war years of the thirties when the Lake Road that went past the Beira was lined with elegant Royal Poincianas with their flamboyant flourish of scarlet orange blooms, so conspicuous that they were reflected in the placid blue waters of the lake, not to mention the teeming animal life it supported like tortoises, pond herons and the infamous lake flies that would, during a certain season, storm the nearby Bishop's College in such numbers that they fell into the soup served for dinner to the boarders who would take it in good spirits, jokingly calling it 'fly soup'. It was very likely this pool of life that rubbed off on the environs of the school which included a rare gold beetle that haunted the giant Madras Thorn trees that fringed it on almost all sides.



Lake Road, Colombo, Grace Van Dort painting 1939

In the middle of the lake was an island even the denizens of Darlington could see. Here lived a couple who grew leafy vegetables for a living. The wife who was nicknamed *Dooapatay* (from the island) would row an *oruva* (canoe) over to this side of the bank to supply Darlington and neighbouring houses with the leaves. At night my paternal kin who lived in Darlington could see a lamp faintly burning in the wooden hut on the lake, making a lovely picture amidst the glistening waters of the lake grizzled with silver from the street lamps along General's Lake Road.

There was even a bathing place simply known as *Totupola* (Ford) by the locals near the Slave Island area which a few members of my paternal clan like Hyder and Akhtar used to visit when they were little. It had these huge steps that led to the lake. The boys would ask the bathers to catch them the little fish known as *Beira Batto*. They would push the water with their hands towards the steps and the boys would take their pick, the crows carrying away the rest.



Old picture of lake in Colombo, perhaps Beira lake and island

This spot, being almost a stone's throw away from home, we took for granted until our teen years when we resorted to the Colpetty Grand Mosque for *Subah*, the Islamic dawn prayer. Having prayed with the congregation which included about a hundred godly souls or so, we would saunter along to the banks of the Beira and tarry a while to allow the blush of the breaking morn to smile on our faces. In our earlier years, it was the Navam Mawatha area close to the Beira Lake that we frequented, not for the ambience, but to skateboard the sloping road that skirted part of Beira Lake. The place was then a far cry from the mini city it is today with its lofty buildings and corporate offices.

There were at the time only a few modest-looking houses and the road was not at all a busy one except for the occasional car or two whose right of passage we dare not hinder.

Here we would resort to with our skateboards accompanied by our neighbourhood friend Hilal who shared our love for adventure and take our stand at the elevated portion of the newly tar macadamised road at the turn from Navam Mawatha to Uttarananda Mawatha whose gentle slope provided the perfect launch for the skates.



Old skateboard still with me after nearly forty years

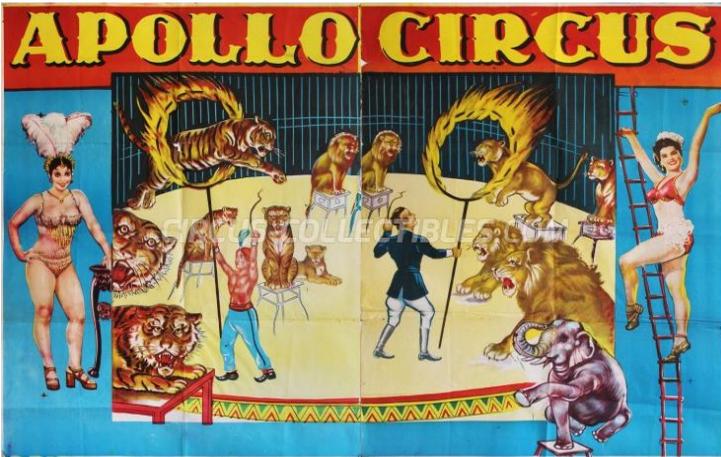
The right foot firmly on the board, a gentle push or two with the left foot would lunge the board forward to a splendid ride though some maneuvering was necessary to navigate the winding road that sloped downwards towards the left.

The skateboards, one of which was a rainbow-coloured fiberglass board depicting a flock of geese in flight and the other, a thicker blue plastic cruiser with a slightly elevated tail, never failed to disappoint us. Firm and hardy, they would survive even thirty years later in almost the same condition we knew them in our younger fun-loving days.

Shows of colour, shows of valour

Sri Lankans if given a choice between bread and circuses, would go for the bread unlike the citizens of Rome who would have probably cried out for more and more circuses just to let their greedy eyes feast on the blood and gore that coloured the arenas of yore. Sri Lankans are a people more concerned about their stomachs than anything else. It is no surprise then that in the immediate open economy era of the late 1970s that encompassed our childhood, bread was plentiful following the free import and supply of wheat at subsidized prices that went into its making, but not so much circuses.

Circuses then came only once in a blue moon, for the swinging sixties when that enterprising impresario Donovan Andre dominated local showbiz with teaseshows like *Haarlem Blackbirds* and wrestling champs like *Dara Singh*, *Ali Riza Bey*, *Angel Face*, *Hooded Terror* and *King Kong* were long gone. But when they did, they enjoyed immense popularity, like the Apollo Circus that rolled into Havelock Park and which due to popular demand went on for several months until December 1979 or thereabouts.



Apollo Circus promotional poster C.1980s

The circus troupe of Indian origin was quite popular not only in India, but other parts of Asia as well, having started from Bulanshahr in Uttar Pradesh in the late 1950s. All I can recall of it is enjoying it with our parents one evening quietly seated under a sprawling tent with vague recollections of some sort of breathtaking trapeze act and a caged lion or tiger whose arrival on the stage was met with a hushed gasp by the audience.

The Army Tattoos, stunning displays of military skill we also enjoyed as any child would. Held at the Sugathadasa Stadium and commencing around 1978, these shows of valour attracted a great number of people from all walks of life, spectators both young and old who would revel at the sight of the ‘war shows’, a sort of raid or attack with a lot of action and daredevil motorcycle stunts among other incredible feats performed by our service members.



Army tattoo pyramid in 1960s. The ones we saw were similar

These tattoos continued for a few years, but were later discontinued, no doubt due to the escalating conflict with Tiger terrorists in the north and east of the country, being revived only after the defeat of terrorism thirty years later. The curious

word *tattoo* used for this sort of show has an interesting history. It seems to have its origins from the Dutch word *taptoe* ‘beat of drum’ or may well be a corruption of an old Dutch command *Doe der to tap toe* ‘turn off the taps’ issued by a drummer ordering innkeepers in war zones to cease selling liquor to soldiers so that they could return to their quarters by nightfall somewhat still in their senses in preparation for battle the following day. The call seems to have evolved into an army musical show before being beefed up with bold displays of military might to become what it is today-a popular spectacle for the general public.

Among the few sports events we attended were the motorcycle races held at Katukurunda, an abandoned World War II airstrip not far from Kalutara which had been converted into a motor racing circuit. This circuit meet venue with its many bends ideal for motor racing had been discovered many years before by an avid racer Andrew Mirando. The Ceylon Motor Cycle Club he formed was soon into organizing races here, not just for motor cycles, but also for cars where man and machine merged as one in the race to be ace. It naturally attracted young blood like our uncles Suranjan and Chandana.



Uncle Suranjan, the bike ace with awards and cups

It was at one such grand event held in early 1981 with its line up of over 30 racing events that uncle Chandana participated with his Suzuki 200 cc in no less than three events. And there we were amidst the maddening crowd. As the riders zoomed past with their high pitched screams and the crowds cheered, mother would cry out “*There’s Chutti Uncle!*”, all to no avail as we had great difficulty making him out at that distance. At any rate he was not a man who stood out from the crowd, small made as he was, even on his machine.

Then there was the Navam Perahera, a colourful procession in honour of the founder of Buddhism, Gautama Buddha that went past our house towards the Beira Lake on the night of the full moon in the month of February. The Perahera, conceived by Galboda Gnanissara who was fondly known as Podi Hamuduruvo or ‘Little monk’ was held for the first time in 1979 when we were about seven years old and thereafter became a yearly event organized by the Gangarama Temple in Hunupitiya. The vaudevillian parade which featured traditional Sinhalese entertainers drawn from far-flung rural areas, would with time rival the famous Esala Perahera of Kandy that had gone on for centuries, ever since the days of the Kandyan Kings.



Navam Perahera was a colourful event going past our house

Accha House and the neighbouring houses peopled by our kith and kin faced a broad throughfare that lay in the path of the procession as it made its way to the picturesque Beira lake to its north. This was General's Lake Road, perhaps an extension of the red sandy Lake Road that once skirted the placid waters of the lake and took its name from one General Lawrence who had his bungalow there.

It did not take our folk long to evolve a tradition whereby we could watch the colourful proceedings in comfort seated on chairs, oblivious to the plight of thousands of others who had begun to throng in from late evening and had to stand, sometimes for hours, to watch the procession that would come their way like a gargantuan millipede, from head to tail. Our elders would sequester the pavement area closer to the kerbs in front of our houses with chairs when the night drew nigh, while we little ones, restless as we were, preferred to watch the spectacle standing or seated on a low rampart-like wall built in the front of our house as a form of protection much like the face mask of an American football player.

The parade would soon roll down our street, a train of man and beast, some real, some unreal as if drawn from another world, one after the other, marching past in waves in almost endless succession; a hotchpotch of the sacrosanct rites of an ancient oriental faith promiscuously blended with an ever so surreal menagerie of monstrosities fit only for a Victorian peep show; a kaleidoscope throbbing with life in all its hues and shades; a tapestry tumbling into life and rumbling with a roar; an ever so unreal hallucination after an acid trip; call it what you will, no words suffice to describe this great pagan pantomime.

It would commence with the *kasakarayo*, the whiplashers, soundly walloping the road with their long whips which not only gave out a thunderous din but also sometimes seemed to emit sparks of fire upon hitting the tar; it was they who cleared the way for the rest of the procession, the torchbearers who flared up the night with their crude flaming torches, fire jugglers who twirled and swirled fire to form a blazing vortex;

majestic, gaily caparisoned tuskers prodded on by their mahouts, stilt-walkers known as *boru-kakul-karay* or false-legged ones who strode the road with pomp and who towering so high up seemed to us little ones like Gullivar's Brobdingnagans, and *yakku*, furry, dark-brown monsters somewhat like long-snouted sloth bears that seemed as if they had just popped out from some mediaeval bestiary, a rather fearsome sight, especially at night.

Other shows then were few and far between though there were also some regular events we attended, but very rarely. One such was the St.Margareth's Day Fair held once a year as part of the Bishop's College Calendar. The fair was held, as it still is, at St.Margareth's Convent along St.Michael's Road, Colpetty, not far from Bishop's College and was one of the few links that still connected the school to the Sisters of Saint Margaret of East Grinstead, England, in whose care it had remained for many decades until as late as the 1950s.



Saint Margaret's Convent where the fair is held every year

In those days the fair had for sale a variety of items from books and foodstuffs to cloth dolls ingeniously turned out by Miss Margareth Dias, the Matron of Bishop's College. It is said that the good old matron used to collect the bright red seeds of the *Madatiya* (Coralwood tree) then strewn all over the front garden of the college to use as boot button eyes for her soft toys. The lady is also said to have been an expert in making bonbons. Another regular feature of the fair then as now was the merry-go-round. The only occasion I recall visiting this eventide fair was when we were around five years old while still studying at the Bishop's College Nursery, though all I could remember of the visit was being given these lovely red, deliciously sweet marzipans which we fancied were real strawberries.



Saint Margaret's Fair merry-go-round. A recent photograph

Santa Claus comes home

In our early years at Accha House we had a strange nocturnal visitor breaking into our house to leave a bagful of goodies the night before Christmas Day – or so we thought – till the cat got out of the bag. It might sound rather strange that a Muslim family living in a largely Buddhist environment had Santa Claus visiting them. But the fact is that mother did not want us missing out on this uniquely Western, or rather Anglo-American tradition usually associated with Christian families. I guess it also served a practical purpose, for mother had shrewdly connected Santa Claus' coming with this character known as Wee Willie Winkie who figures in the nursery rhyme:

*Wee Willie Winkie runs through the town
Upstairs and downstairs in his night gown
Tapping at the window, crying at the lock
Are the children in their bed, for it's past ten o'clock*

Mother had slightly twisted the story to have us believe that Wee Willie Winkie inquired whether children were in their beds by eight o'clock, and if not, would report the matter to Santa who would indeed be very very cross! This was no doubt a ruse to get us to bed early. So we would be quietly tucked into bed by eight, attired in the comfortable bedwear mother used to sew us with the old treadle Singer sewing machine that sat in a corner of the dining room, flimsy pyjamas made of patterned cotton with elastic ribbon at the waist for keeping it in place, and equally flimsy shirts of the same material that could be buttoned in front with metal press studs, light wear so easy to get into and nod off soundly without a care for the world unlike the kilt-like sarongs loosely wound round the waist most local boys of our age would have gotten used to, blissfully unaware that it could loosen in their sleep and expose their privities to vulgar female gaze.

The ruse certainly worked for a couple of years till we got used to staying awake a bit late to watch television

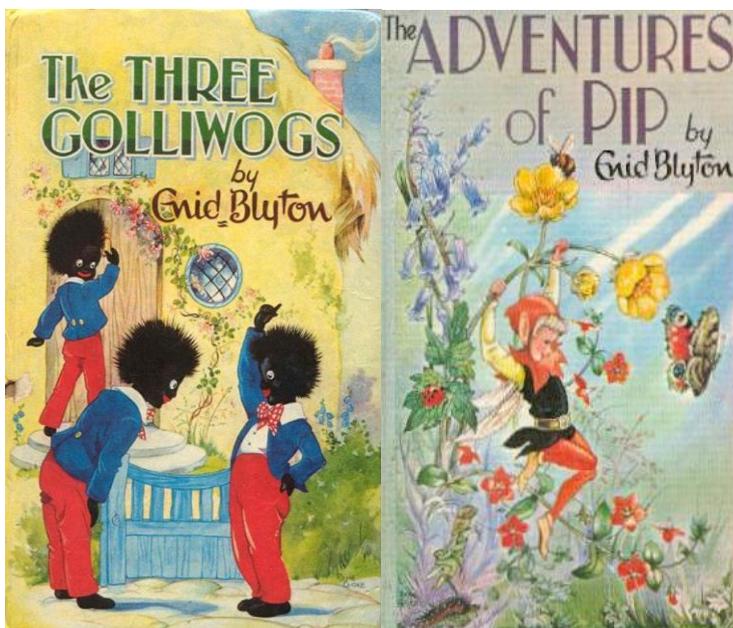
programmes like *Baa Baa Black Sheep* that was telecast around 9.00 pm. And so it was that from about the ages of five to ten years, we would, agog with excitement, eagerly await the coming of Santa. Mother had us believe that the jolly old fellow silently crept into the house in the dead of night with a sackful of gifts for us kids. We wondered how he got in, perhaps through the roof, or maybe the sooty chimney in the kitchen at the rear of the house. What we were most curious about were the gifts he would bring us. So curious indeed that I can still recall one night how restless I was on this large giant size bed we all shared, pricking my ear to catch a sound of Santa, perhaps tiptoeing softly across the room with his sackful of toys perched on his back to tuck them under the bed. We were supposed to be sleeping snugly in bed, or else Santa would be cross. But I could not as much as catch a rustle of the fellow stealthily at his job despite the thousands of houses he was supposed to be covering in a single night!

As we woke up next morning, lo and behold, our eyes would fall on the brown paper bags stuffed with the presents Santa had brought us, placed at the head of the bed or neatly tucked under it. These were usually toys like spinning tops and Christmas crackers which we called *bon bons*, cardboard tubes wrapped in decorated paper resembling oversized sweet wrappers which had to be pulled by two people whereupon it exploded with a bang revealing some hidden trinket like a tiny silver gun.



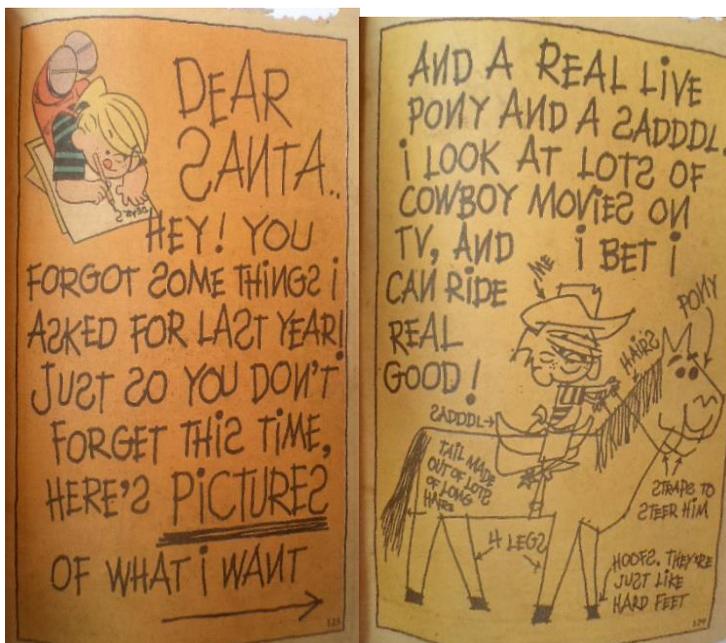
Bon bons like the ones we knew

And not surprisingly, there were story books. We wondered why Santa would leave us books, especially story books. Those given us for Christmas were Enid Blyton's books with colourful hard covers but rather dull cream-white pages inside with a lot of words and quite a few sketches telling the exploits of characters such as the Three Golliwogs and Pip the little pixie. Mother, who had to put up with our negative remarks on Santa's choice, would stress the importance of books. This itself should have sufficed to reveal who Santa really was, but for some reason we did not get it. We had this weird feeling that mother was somehow communicating with Santa and telling him her preferences rather than ours.



Among the books we were given at X'mas. These are from the Internet as I have lost the original books we had

It was then that we conceived the idea of writing a Xmas wishlist to Santa, inspired by a *Dennis the Menace Christmas Number* which reproduced a letter addressed to Santa by the little brat, describing in sketches and notes what he expected for Christmas – an elephant, a real live pony, a submarine and a rocket. Our requests were understandably more down-to-earth. The list we penned into a letter, addressing it to Santa in the North Pole and posted it in the red pillar box right in front of our house. What became of it I cannot say, except that even then, Santa’s presents that came our way were not always to our liking.



Dennis Xmas Wishlist. This one's still with me

Our most memorable Christmases were spent at Accha House with our cousins Rajiv, Kumeshi and Mirukshi. It was during their very first visit to Accha House while on vacation from Kenya in the December of 1977 that aunt Sunethra gifted us

these dainty little stickers with Christmas themes that she had purchased in Nairobi. The colourful stickers, which included Santa and Reindeer were all puffed up with large goggly eyes formed of semi-globular transparent plastic against a white backdrop within which were little black balls like mustard seeds that moved hither and thither.



The X,mas stickers we had. This one's from the Internet

In the days leading to Christmas Eve, our cousins were told that Santa would descend into the house, bearing gifts, either through the skylight in the corner of our room or through the little room to its left. They were quite apprehensive that Santa would only leave us, the Hussein boys, gifts as naturally we would be the only kids he would set his eyes upon as he descended, so much so that mother had to console them,

especially naughty Kumeshi, that Santa could not forget anybody. Indeed, the next day, our cousins too had their sacks of gifts. One I distinctly remember that Mirukshi got was this little plastic apple bank from which a worm popped out to grab a coin placed upon a button and making away with it to deposit it inside. Months later I noticed the same toy displayed for sale at Malee Book Centre.



Malee Bookshop sold many gift items especially at Xmas

We did not know it then, but most children our age did not have Santa visiting them, but we were too busy believing in him to take notice, that is until one fine day when our Kenyan cousins made their third visit to the country in the early 1980s. We were discussing among ourselves what to write to Santa, when cousin Rajiv, the spoilsport he was, broke the news – there was no Santa Claus! This we could not dismiss lightly as our skeptical cousin was a years older than us and having greater overseas exposure had grown all the more wiser, quickly outgrowing the days he had actually believed in Santa, a belief he shared with us during earlier Christmas Eves we spent together at Accha House. We too had by now faintly begun to suspect that Santa was mere fantasy and now there was no need to beguile ourselves any more. We were around 11 years old and it was high time we grew up.

The truth is that the real Santa was no kindly old fellow. The figure who would eventually evolve into Santa Claus was Saint Nicholas, a 4th century Bishop of Myra, in what is now Turkey. A rather mean fellow, he went so far as to slap a fellow bishop, the good old Arius of Alexandria, on the face at the Council of Nicaea for teaching that Christ was a created being instead of one eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, thus paving the way for the bloody persecution of fellow Christians and others who did not concur with the ridiculous idea that God was Three in One- Father, Son and Holy Ghost; a far cry from a true Christian saint, and certainly no inspiration for kids. The Saint who would become Santa was disrobed of his Bishop's habit, deported to the North Pole and divested of his darker side to capture the imagination of innocent young minds.

Today's Santa Claus is after all nothing but an Americanized version of an already mellowed Dutch *Sinter Klaas* introduced by migrants from Holland who kept him despite the Protestant reformation of Martin Luther that did away with the veneration of Saints including Old Nick and his alter ego Santa Claus. The Coca Cola Company played a major role in redressing him, when in 1931 it got Artist Haddon Sundblom to come up with a character who could better appeal to children.



Sundblom's Santa Claus, nothing like the real one

And so was born the Santa of today – a product of gaudy commercialism and a far cry from the days of the three Magi who brought gifts for the babe in the manger, thus beginning the tradition of gift giving. However Santa was not universally accepted as Christmas gift-giver in Europe, which was a function often delegated to females, so that in Germany we still have *Christkind*, an angelic messenger from Jesus in the form of a beautiful fair-haired girl with a shining crown of candles; in Italy *La Befana*, a kindly old hag and in Russia *Babouschka*, a matronly grandmotherly figure, certainly a better choice than the portly bushy-bearded old man who is even known to scare little girls out of their wits with his loud guffaw of *ho.ho...*

Playing with fire

December 31, the night ushering the New Year was celebrated by our household and the neighbouring houses in grand style with fireworks of various descriptions occupying a prominent place in the celebrations. True, these did not come in the variety they did in the fifties when fireworks like *Golden Rains*, *Silver Fountains*, *Mines & Stars*, *Fire Balloons* and *Jolli Bombs* could be procured from places like Fireworks Palace in Pettah, but still they came in a considerable variety even thirty years later, for there were besides the ordinary *Firecrackers*, *Sky Rockets*, *Roman Candles* and *Catharine's Wheels* all set for an orgy of fire - A feast for the eyes of ordinary folk and porn for the eyes of pyros.

Grandpa who lived away from the family in Galle Face Courts, was in principle against fireworks. "*It is like burning money*" he would say, and I couldn't but agree with him now. He nevertheless saw to it that a large quantity of fireworks of various descriptions was delivered to Accha House a day or two before the grand night. He simply could not help but provide the household with the works, or else he risked alienating his brood, particularly his more restless son Chandana who obviously did not share his old man's view that lighting fireworks amounted to burning money.



Two Elephants safety matches with which we lit crackers

He certainly couldn't, for he was a regular smoker of premium cigarettes like *Bristol* and *Gold Leaf* which more or less amounted to the same thing, the little money he made doing odd jobs going up in smoke.

The arsenal sat prettily on the dining table till the big night came, when it was taken outdoors to wreak havoc on the otherwise clean environment and disturb the peace of the night. Our uncles, particularly Chandana whom we called 'Chutti Uncle' were the main perpetrators of this incendiary racket, especially with the *ratigna*, firecrackers or squibs with a fuse which when lit would explode with a loud noise. The two most popular brands then were *Alidon* and *Hanuman* which came in flat paper packets or circular paper boxes.



Firecrackers like this were sold opposite Colpetty market

Also joining in the fun were many of mother's cousins from the neighbouring houses; grandaunt Indra's older boys Athula and Anil and granduncle Piyasena's boys Harendra and Piyal, not to mention granduncle Sumanadasa's son Gihan who eagerly looked forward to opportunities like this to express himself best- with a bang. The womenfolk, who stuck closer to their homes on account of the noise, hardly figured in the action, simply enjoying the proceedings from a distance.

The young fellows took their stand on both sides of the street, turning it into a carnival of fire with noisy *Firecrackers* with

fuses kissing one another so that they exploded in tandem like rounds of machine gun fire; sleek *skyrockets* that made their way to the heavens with a swish, only to burst high up and light up the night sky; *Roman Candles*, cylindrical bars like dynamite sticks with a fuse which spewed out glowing balls of fire; and *Catharine's Wheels*, spiral things resting on a pin, which when lit, revolved madly, spinning hither and thither like a crab on fire. We kids, while inching closer to the theatre of action, were still afraid to light crackers as a result of the scary stories of burn victims mother had told us and contented ourselves with *Wire Sparklers* that one held with the hand, lighting it at the top so that it effloresced, sprinkling bright starry sparks like a flower of fire that broke into a shower of golden rain before it hit the ground.



Wire Sparklers like the ones we had back then

The fun was over within an hour or so, leaving in its wake the heavy sulfurous odour of gunpowder and thousands of tatters of paper from the exploding fireworks that now littered the deserted street. We would quietly rummage through the paper rubble hoping to stumble upon a few unexploded squibs from whose bowels we would extract the gunpowder for our very own pyrotechnics. But this we would save for another day- for tonight we had seen enough!

Fasts, Feasts and Festivals

The moon plays a big role in Muslim religious life, determining when we fast and when we feast at our festivals. This is because the Islamic calendar is a lunar one with 12 moons from new moon to full moon making a year, simple enough even to a very primitive mind.

There is one hitch though, that is, there are no fixed seasons like we find in the solar calendar so that a given lunar month may fall on a summer in a particular year and on a winter after several more years. As a result, even the events associated with them are not fixed, but rather rotate throughout the year, based as it is upon the sighting of the crescent or new moon at night.

Islamdom has only two festivals, both based on the lunar calendar, the Ramazan festival and the Hajj festival. The former celebrates the culmination of the Ramazan fast and the latter the conclusion of the Hajj pilgrimage, both of these being duties binding on every Muslim man and woman, just as much as the Shahadah or Declaration of Faith, the Salat or Prayer and the Zakat or Alms Tax, all of which constitute what are known as the Five Pillars of Islam.

The moon-long fast in the Islamic month of Ramazan when Muslims have to abstain from food, drink and sex is no easy task for the worldly minded, but once one's mind and body is attuned to it from one's very young days, it doesn't prove to be so difficult after all. It increases piety, inculcates patience, instills discipline, stimulates empathy with the poor and leads to good health – not a bad prospect after all.

Like most Muslim children we were taught to fast from our very young days, at about the age of seven or so. Our parents would wake us up in the wee hours before dawn broke to partake of a meal known as *sahar* or *savar*. I still wonder how they managed to get us up at that time; perhaps an alarm clock did the trick. In the olden days though, before we were born, there were fakeer mendicants with hurricane lanterns who would do the rounds in local towns, knocking on the doors and shouting a mumbo jumbo “Otto Bawa Otto” to wake up the

faithful for the last meal before the fast, a tradition still found in certain parts of the Arab world where a wake-up call man known as *Misarahati* appearing as if mysteriously in the dead of night and shortly before the break of dawn, and holding a lamp, would sing and beat his little drum to wake up people, sometimes even calling out their names; a *Wee Willie Winkie* of sorts, only with the roles reversed, for he woke up people, not ensured that they were asleep.

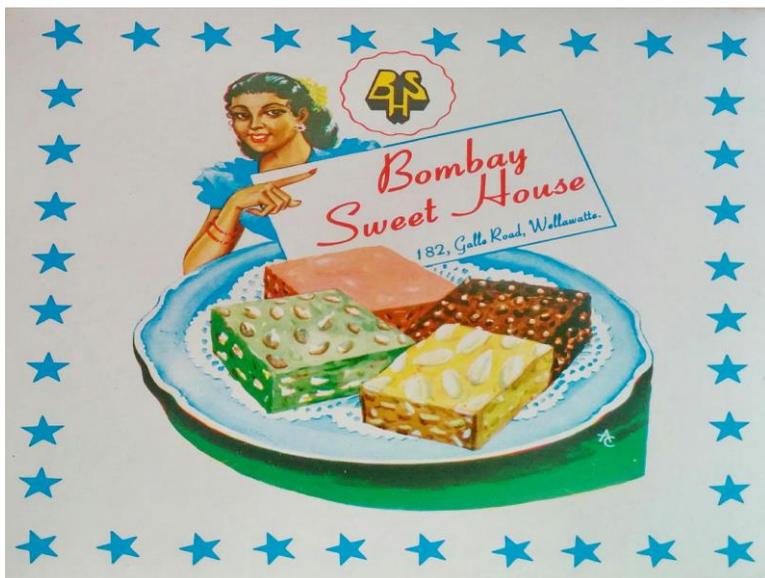


Misarahati Wake up man like the Bawas we once had

We would not have anything to eat or drink till dusk set in, when we would break our fast, usually with dates and water in the tradition of our beloved Prophet, though after this we freely indulged in some well deserved delicacies like *samosas*, triangular pastries filled with minced beef and *gulab jamoons*, ball-shaped cakes soaked in sweet syrup, washed down with *faluda*, a refreshing drink made with milk and rose syrup. This last was almost out of the world; nectar, elixir, ambrosia, all in one, so relieving to a parched tongue.

My favourite were the *gulab jamoons*, an item of Indian origin we got from *Bombay Sweet House* in Colpetty. So much so that once when our Islam teacher at Mahanama College

Sitty Miss inquired what we had for our pre-dawn meal or dinner I blurted out ‘gulab jamoons’ without giving it much thought. Quite taken aback she advised me that we ought to take something more substantial. “*You must take rice!*” she told me matter of factly. I wouldn’t ever forget that piece of sagely counsel, or that shocked look on her face, perhaps imagining us spoilt brats greedily stuffing our little bellies with these *gulab jamoons*, slurping and burping till we could take no more.



Bombay Sweet House’s sweets came packed in boxes like this

Some of our fasts we broke at home and some we broke at father’s family home Umma House to which we resorted to once in a while. The folk there had it as good as us or even better, given grandma *Umma’s* culinary skills, including that invigorating gruel known as *kanji* she used to make with rice, coconut milk and garlic with a generous quantity of beef bones and flesh thrown in for good measure. This regimen would go

on for a month, or rather a moon of about 28 or 29 days before it would all end with the Ramazan festival the very next day.

On that day we would resort to Umma House clad in our finery, new clothes mother had sewn for us, and instinctively cluster round a large table that groaned with goodies of all descriptions.



Hussein boys with mother on festival day at Umma House

Liberally spread out on the table that day were a variety of sweetmeats Umma had herself prepared, so numerous that I am not even able to recall what they were except that they included *sanja*, a firm jelly made of seaweed cut into square or diamond shapes and coloured red or green, *sooji*, a soft yellow confection made of semolina, margarine and sugar and *ambarella dosi*, a juicy brownish fruit preserve made by boiling hogplum in sugar syrup.



Among grandma's sweets, sooji was my favourite

The luncheon that followed in the afternoon that day comprised of an exceedingly rich and delectable rice dish known as *buriyani* of grandma's own making, ably assisted by her faithful accomplice, an elderly Muslim woman from Slave Island we called Nona Sacchi. What went into it was of course no secret. The rice, usually the long-grained *basmathi*, was cooked in a very large aluminium vessel in the kitchen along with ghee or clarified butter, perfumed with rose water and coloured yellow, varying from grain to grain, from a deep yellow, almost orange to a lighter yellow. It was spiced with various condiments and embellished with chunks of beef or mutton. The meal was served on a platter upon a large rectangular table in the inner hall with its usual accompaniments of chicken curry, mixed pea, cashewnut and liver curry, mint sambol and slices of pineapple.

In keeping with local Muslim custom, it were the males who ate first. The master of the house, uncle Nazir, would be seated with his kith and kin, sidekicks and stooges around the long table as if in a sumptuous banquet the likes of which we saw only in our Asterix comics when the Gauls feasted after the return of their hero, only that it was without the wild boar. We

kids were always or almost always given a place in the table at the very first serving as uncle Nazir loved having us around. The womenfolk would have their meals after the men had partaken of theirs. It was the law of the lion here. The aromatic rice and meat meal we would indulge in to our fill, and as if that were not enough, would be served at the end of it, a cup of *vattalappam*, a soft brown pudding studded with little pores that oozed with sweet syrup which grandmother had prepared earlier in the day by steaming in ceramic or aluminium bowls a mixture of coconut milk, beaten eggs, palm sugar and cardamoms. Later in the day, before we took leave to return home, our elders, grandma and uncle Nazir, would force into our hands notes of money which they called *perunaal salli* (festival money) to do with it as we wished.



Bowl of Vattalappam. Nothing like the way grandma made it

The fact however is that living in a largely non-Muslim tropical isle, we kids missed out on much of the revelry and merriment that characterizes the Ramazan festival and even the moon-long evenings and nights after breaking the fast seen in Islamic countries, particularly in the Arab world where it is considered the most joyful of months with happy families picnicking in green areas like parks and zoos when breaking their fast, a custom that has only recently emerged in our

country when whole families would resort to scenic spots like the Galle Face Green to break their fast picnic style, but one which we never saw in our young days.



Ramadan in Arab world is full of life and colour unlike here

As part of the festivities in these countries which unlike ours has evolved over time, getting merrier and merrier as people partook of the cheer of the good season, one finds the streets and shops gaily decorated with brightly lit lights often in the form of crescent and star, lucent lanterns of white and myriad colours and even golden and silver tinsel decorations, again of star and crescent which is widely considered the symbol of Islam ever since the days of the Ottoman Turks. And when it all crescendos in the day of the festival, little children would be gifted with beautifully decorated gift bags of toys and candy or money to spend time at amusement parks, while towards the evening and night, people in festive mood would gather to enjoy communal meals with cookies for the little ones filled with nuts and coated with sugar, musical plays and even

fireworks, all of which dwarf the Christmas celebrations of the West. But all this we in our little country missed.

The Prophet of Islam, despite his abstemious lifestyle, was no killjoy and always had the happiness of people and especially of children in mind, so much so that one day when an over-zealous companion found some little girls singing in the Prophet's house and cried out: "*Musical instruments of Satan in the house of the Messenger of God!*", the Prophet rebuked him "*Leave them alone, Abu Bakr, every nation has a festival, and this is our festival*". This was somebody from whom even Oliver Cromwell and his roundheads - who in their puritanical fervour banned Christmas celebrations in England - could have learnt from, at least for the sake of the children.

The Hajj festival was celebrated much like the Ramazan feast except that it was not celebrated as grandly and involved the sacrifice of a goat or sometimes a bull, a ritual going back to the days of the patriarch Abraham. The sacrifice we were told was reminiscent of the times when Abraham, the friend of God and forbear of the Arabs was told in a dream to sacrifice his son Ishmael. If that were the Will of God, then it should be done said the brave boy, when his father told him about his dream. As Abraham was about to sacrifice his son, a ram appeared as if from nowhere and Abraham was told to sacrifice it instead of his beloved son. God had indeed been merciful to Abraham and his son who had passed the test the Almighty wished to try them with, the test of devotion to God even at the cost of parental love. The boy, Ishmael, whom Abraham had fathered through an equally strong-willed Egyptian woman named Hagar would go on to sire a great nation, the Arabs from amongst whom the final messenger of God to mankind, Muhammad, would emerge. Little wonder then that it was a cause for celebration.

In the morning of that festive day, we would come across the sacrificial animal, usually a billy goat, in the front garden of Umma House tethered with a rope tied to a tree or a stake in the ground and fed on leaves which it ceaselessly munched as if it had nothing else to do. It just seemed as if it was meant for

the table. Before long it would be conveyed to the backyard of the house to be slaughtered by the butcher in a ritual known as *Qurbaan*. We kids would watch the sacrifice wide-eyed from the kitchen window that opened out to the backyard and could see the blood from the goat spurting out as if in a spray, almost like a fountain of deep red water, only thicker and moving hither and thither as the animal momentarily struggled to give out its last gasps of life. The cut at the carotid artery which supplied blood from the heart to the head which is an indispensable part of the ritual had triggered the spray and though it would continue, the brain of the animal would have by this time been deprived of blood, sending it into a state of permanent anaesthesia. The carcass would be skinned and cut up into chunks of meat to be cooked for the household and distributed to kindred and needy. This was a day the poor looked forward to, not least because of the chunks of fresh meat that would come their way.

Late that evening or the following day, a heavy shower of rain known as the *Haj mala* ‘Rain of the Hajj’ would fall from the heavens, cleansing the earth of the blood of the sacrificial animal - little doubt a Sign from God that He was pleased with the sacrifice.



Local Muslims believe it rains the day after Hajj festival

The Festival of the Sun

Almost every nation has its New Year or at any rate some festive season which they celebrate with much fanfare. The Persians had their *Nauroz*, the Romans their *Saturnalia* and the Pagan Norsemen their *Yule*. The Sinhalese have from time immemorial also had a day of their own which is still celebrated – the *Alut Avurudda* simply meaning ‘New Year’.

The Sinhala New Year which falls in mid-April marks the transition of the sun from the constellation of *Meena* (Pisces) to that of *Mesa* (Aries) and seems to have had its origins in some sort of ancient agricultural festival in honour of the sun as giver of light and life. The *Soorya* or Sun was after all regarded as a divinity by the ancient Aryans of North India, a belief they would have passed on to the Sinhalese, an offshoot of the Aryans who settled in Sri Lanka in Pre-Christian times.

The New Year at Accha House like in all Sinhalese Buddhist households was celebrated annually with a communal meal of milk-rice and sweetmeats, though not as grandly as in the rural villages where it is celebrated with much jollity even to this day.



Sinhala New Year at Accha House. Grandma and children have a meal of milk rice and sweetmeats on a banana leaf

It certainly could not come anywhere near the Muslim festivals celebrated at Umma House with their rich repasts of rice and sweets and gifts of money for us kids. Rather it was a very simple affair, reflecting the usually austere lifestyle of Sinhalese Buddhists in general. On the morning of the big day, a full length banana leaf obtained from a patch of banana trees in our backyard would be placed upon the floor a little away from the large dining table. Our grandmother *Accha* and aunts would place upon it square pieces of *Kiribat* or Milk-rice, a white rice cake made by boiling rice in coconut milk, soft brown oil cakes known as *Kevum* and crispy yellow rounded biscuits known as *Kokis*, not to mention the bunch of bananas that always found a place with this sort of fare.



Accha with youngest member of the family on New Year Day

These delicacies we would indulge in with great relish, especially the oil cakes known as *Kevum*, so sweet and tender that it could easily rank as the best sweetmeat the usually austere Sinhalese ever produced in their long history. Indeed so finely made were they, even in the olden days that the Hollanders who found their way to the island over three centuries ago inquired whether not they grew on trees,

supposing it beyond the art of man to make such dainties. It is remarkable nevertheless that its makers should have bestowed upon it the rather unassuming name of *Kevum*, simply meaning 'eatables'.



Sinhala New Year as celebrated by our next door neighbours

These dainties were prepared at home in the days leading to the New Year by women especially summoned for the purpose. These old dames who wore the traditional *redde-hette* - wraps for their waists and bodices for their bosoms - were experts in the culinary art of their ancient race. They would take their place in the corridor leading to the kitchen near the steps that led outside and seated on low stools would commence their task. A primitive fireplace would be formed of firewood with bricks on three sides to support a concave pan filled with coconut oil. Into it they would deftly pour a dripping batter made of rice flour, coconut milk and treacle obtained from the kitul palm, letting it fry while at the same time forming a portion of it into a protrusion much like a *konde* or hair bun the like one often sees in Sinhalese village women by means of an *ekel* (midrib of the coconut leaf).

These *kevum* we found hard to resist even many days later as they still retained their sweetness and tenderness, so unlike the oil cakes one finds today.



Frying kevum just like the old women at home did

Also prepared at home were *kokis*, crisp yellow biscuits in the form of a *roda* or wheel made by dipping a special metal mould with wooden handle into a batter of rice flour, coconut milk and turmeric, and frying these in oil. This unlike the decidedly native *kevum* seems to have been a colonial introduction as it had its origins in the Dutch *koekjes* meaning ‘biscuit’ or more properly ‘little cake’, the same term that gave American English the word *cookies* introduced by the Dutch settlers of the New World. Also sometimes figuring on that day was a *broeder*, a delectable cake of Dutch origin like a little mountain with fluted pathways which Accha did her best to procure for the occasion.

Other items such as *Atiraha*, brown disc-shaped cakes fried in oil and *Mun-kevum*, diamond-shaped sweets filled with a sweetened ground green gram filling also found their way home from the neighbours, but none of it captured my fancy like the *Asmi*, a vermicelli-like white cake somewhat like a crescent sweetened with sugar syrup coloured a light red.



Asmi, a vermicelli-like white cake was my favourite

We usually stayed home that day except for our regular New Year's visit to grandfather's apartment at Galle Face Courts which we eagerly looked forward to, especially since the generous old man would present us each with sheaves of betel leaves with a Hundred Rupees Note to spice it and an extra One Rupee coin 'for luck' as he put it. This was a princely sum of money back then.

The generous gift notwithstanding, we being Muslims, would not fall at his feet to prostrate and worship him as was the Sinhala Buddhist custom for kids to do their elders as a show of respect, but he seems never to have minded it. A widely read man, he probably knew that one could reasonably not expect Muslims, even little kids, to bow down to anyone except the One True God they worshipped.



A hundred rupee note back then was a lot of money

We for our part dreaded the prospect of falling prostrate before anybody, thinking of it as a rather weird and uncivilized practice. I can still recall in my very young days, breaking into tears on a first day of school at Mahanama College, upon seeing my Buddhist classmates kow-towing before their teacher. I could simply not bring myself to do it, not because of any pride I may have had, but because it seemed so odd.

This in itself was strange given my upbringing in a largely Sinhala-Buddhist household; stranger still is the fact that I cannot recall any occasion of anybody in that household ever falling before another, for even when grandfather did pay an occasional visit, all his grown-up children did was to stand up as a mark of respect as he strode in to the main hall like a general inspecting his troops; but not to go down on all fours, the consequences perhaps of a slightly dysfunctional Sinhalese Buddhist family that did not have a man about the house to ensure that tradition was maintained.

If they indeed did crouch before their old man, at least on New Year's Day when it could be most expected, I cannot say for certain, for we usually visited grandfather that day accompanied only by our parents who drove us there every New Year's morning in their Volkswagen Beetle. Whether such visits away from the rest were deliberately intended to shield us from the unsavoury proceedings that day I cannot say.