

## PADDY CULTIVATION THE VANNI: A CURSORY LINGUISTIC SURVEY<sup>1</sup>

Unlike in many other regions of Sri Lanka, the people of the Vanni depend equally on the low-land as well as the highland (chena) cultivation. Paddy, of course, is the main crop raised and irrigation is mainly with the water from the reservoirs commonly known as tanks (*vāv yaTute govitāno*), as opposed to the rain-dependent cultivation (*ahas vāsēn govitāna*) as practised in most other areas.

When the month of *Nikini* (July-August) approaches and if the village tank contains enough water, the peasants get ready for cultivation by clearing the fields of the intrusion of the surrounding jungle, which is known as *Vanāta keTilla*. In the field itself, weeds such as *balliospermum axillare* (*nidikumba*), *cassia* (*tōra*), and *nerium* (*pila*) etc., are uprooted, left to dry in the sun and burned. In the meantime the *gamarāla*(s)<sup>2</sup> hold a meeting and decide on the date on which to open the sluice gate of the tank. Usually a representative of the Area Irrigation Engineer attends this meeting, because he is the Government officer responsible for opening and the closing of the sluice gate. After that the peasants get busy to plough and prepare the fields for sowing. Usually the cattle are let loose in the bush to graze at their own sweet will. They come home to the village fold only at dusk. One of the first things the farmer has to do for ploughing is to herd them into jungle enclosures called *nāmi*. These *nāmi*(s) are such that once the cattle are herded into them, they cannot escape, but remain there eating the available grass and leaves.

When the time comes, they are caught and yoked to the plough and the first ploughing, *binnāguma*, which comes down from the primeaval days as an act of supreme cultural significance (cf. *vap magula*), commences at an auspicious hour. The Vanni plough, of which the design comes from the days of yore, has a single plough-pole (*patakaDe*) made of hard wood such as satin. The handle (*korawakā*) is also made of strong wood, and the part that furrows into the earth, called *nāwata*, ends in an iron beading known as the *hīvāla*. The *patakaDe* is joined to the *korawakā* by means of a huge pin called the *paluānē*. An experienced ploughman knows how high and at what angle the handle should be for easy ploughing. The cross-pole, *viyagaha*, has holes bored in it for the cattle to be yoked with rope, *viyalanu*. Also there is a rope tied to the yoke called the *amutubāna*, which is used in case of steering problems.

1. This information is a spin-off from a dialect survey conducted by me in the Vanni region. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the late Professor D.E. Hettiaratchi, for having given me the initial training in Field Linguistics. The survey was conducted in 1970. The process of dialect levelling has eroded some of the dialect differences today; yet since Japanese machines run on Middle Eastern fuel have not as yet invaded the Vanni region, the methods of agriculture, and thereby the dialect used remain basically the same as in the past.
2. The Irrigation Ordinance of 1856 replaced this officer with *Vel Vidāne*: but the older peasants still call him *gamarāla*.

When compared with the modern mechanical plough, the wooden plough might look primitive: but for these people who have practised paddy cultivation since time immemorial ploughing is a delicate art. Furlowing looks like marking over-lapping oblong circles on the ground; but one furrow has to touch the next and each set of such oblong circles is called an *atura*. At the finish of one *atura*, the next commences. The one nearest to the bund is *ahabaDa atura*. Usually there are three *atura(s)* in a *liyādda* which is being ploughed, the central one being called *māda atura*, and one that is being finished, *gevena atura*. When the *ahabaDa atura* is about to be finished, the *gevena atura* will be started. A single act of ploughing irrespective of the fact whether it is the first or a repeat, is called *hīgevāDuma* or *hībāsma*. The two bulls yoked to the plough also have designations—the bull to the centre of the field is *ātul poleya*, the outer one, *piTa' poleya*. Together they make a *bānd*.

The levelling of the paddy bed is done by a gadget known as the *pōruwa*. *Pōruwa* in the Vanni is a broad wooden plank drawn by bulls. It has also two poles running in angular fashion from the edges of the flanks to the handle pole, these being called *ūdura(s)*. Holes near the lower edge of the flank transfer the water to the section already levelled. The handle is connected to the *viyagaha* (yoke) and has also an *amutubāna* for controlling purposes.

The field that is ploughed may be jointly cultivated by a number of peasants or it may belong to one single peasant; but it is rarely that a peasant owns more than a few dozens of square metres of paddy land. They have their own land measurements, which are very arbitrary. *Hīnna* which is the extent of about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  fathoms is the smallest. Next comes *iravalla*, and two *iravalla(s)* make one *issara*. The extent of a man's paddy land is usually reckoned by the number of *issara(s)* he has. even a man who has 4-5 *issara(s)* is taken to be well off.

The drainage has to be seen to before the paddy is sown. Each paddy bed (*liyādda*) has an inlet *vakkaDa* (sluice) and an outlet *vakkaDa* for water. The drain that carries water from the inlet *vakkaDa* to the outlet *vakkaDa* is called *mudun āla*. After digging this, *atu āla(s)* (small drains) are made as required, all joining the *mudun āla* so that all the water flows to the main drain. These drains in the mud are made with the hoe or a small *pōruva*; the section enclosed between two *atu āla(s)* is called a *baDala*.

When the rice paddies which are already germinated (*kanu kapila*) are sown by expert hands and when roots are firmly transfixed to the earth, the time has come for the first irrigation of the field (*isnam hāravilla*)<sup>3</sup>. Peasants say that this should be done within seven days of the sowing. The field will be irrigated several times

3. Items like *gevāDuma*, *binnūguma* and *isnantemuma* seem to have been used in ancient Sri Lanka, too. For instance, a Sinhala Classic, *Saddharmaratanaṅgaḷi*, written by Dharmasēna in the 13th century (Dambadeni period), mentions some of them: cf. ed. Weragoda Amaramoli, Ratnakara, Colombo (1954) p. 163.

before the paddy is ripe for reaping. This is done by opening the inlet (*vakkaDa*) and letting the water inundate it. The peasants have from then on to maintain a ceaseless vigil to keep stray cattle, wild boar, wild elephants and birds away from the ripening paddy, which they find very inviting. To do this, the men usually put up a hut (*pāla*) and keep watch at night. Keeping watch in the *pāla* is so important that there is a saying in the Vanni region which goes:

*vāsalā murē āriyat pāl murē arinna epā*

meaning:

“Even if the watch duty at the Royal Palace is neglected, don’t neglect the watch-duty at the paddy field”.<sup>4</sup>

Innumerable *pāl sīpadas*, a variety of folk poetry, have originated from those who keep watch at night over their paddy fields. To shake off one’s drowsiness or loneliness or both, one occupant of a *pāla* recites a few lines in a long drawn-out melodious tune, to which sometimes another in a neighbouring watch-hut may respond, as a result of which poetic dialogues may ensue, the darkness of night reverberating with their chant. Their philosophy of life, expectations, grievances, loves and beliefs etc. are expressed in these *pāl sīpada(s)*, while at the same time they serve to fend off depredators of their fields as well as their own isolation and loneliness through the hours of darkness.

If there is no drought or so the paddy plants start bearing the ears in the stem, the two stages of which process are known as *hīnbanDi* and *mahabanDi*. What happens next is known as *kiri āllilla* or *kiraTa nāmilla*, which means that the rice grains are formed in the pod of the corn. Once the *kiri āllilla* takes place the field is fed with no more water. (If the field is subjected to irrigation at this times the peasants believe that the paddy will turn out to be chaff (*bol*). Soon the process of ripening starts. Taking advantage of the bright weather, the ears of paddy turn golden; the peasants call this yellowing *puwak atte pāya* (the colour of the [ripe] areca branch) or *pāhum pāTa* (matured hue). This gives way to a slight darkening of the ears recognized by the peasants as *goma kalu gāhenava* (taking the colour of cow dung). The paddy is now ready for harvesting.

Some peasants make a *bāre* (a vow of sacrifice to supernatural forces for their benevolence) before harvesting and again after it, but before threshing. The golden ears of the ripened paddy gladden the hearts of the Vanni folk. This joy has given rise to a host of *nelum kavi* (harvesting songs). Rows of women dressed in clothes of colourful design reap the paddy and lay it down in sheaves to the rhythm of this poetry. Some times a man or a woman leads in singing and the others join in the

4. Merlin Peris mentions ‘*pelmura*’ as the duty of “a large number of people who were enlisted under headmen to protect the King’s field.....by keeping out.....wild elephants. This *rajakariya* of the cultivators, akin to the *wahalmura*, i.e. guarding the King’s palace, the cultivators of old were only too proud to perform”. See his ‘Knox on Elephants’ *Ceylon Studies Seminar*. Paper No. 2 for 1991, p.36

chorus. They cut the paddy with the sickle at about the mid-height of the stem and gather it in their hands; each such handful is called *uppiDa*. A number of them is known as *māppiDa*, and they are left in the field or on the bund. Those who collect them systematically in mats call each collection a *kola miTiya*-that is, 'one load carried to the threshing ground. On it there are a number of *kola miTiya(s)*; these are kept in an orderly fashion - ears facing the centre. Each such small stack is called a *vaTamaluva*, and a number of *vaTamaluva(s)* make one stack, a *kola*. Until the paddy is threshed it has to be protected from the wild elephants, wild boar and stray cattle etc. So each peasant has to take his turn to keep watch at night. This duty is called *kola kamate pālē iñdilla*.

The Vanni peasant, who is usually light-hearted and jovial, becomes very serious, sombre and ritualist once threshing starts<sup>5</sup>. The open-air threshing floor is cleaned as the first of the threshing activities. The sticks needed to drive the cattle (*keviTi*) and the twig-brooms (*bōl atu*) are cut from the jungle and kept aside. Usually the cattle come to the village pen only in the evening: before threshing starts, such cattle are herded into jungle enclosures until they are yoked to thresh the paddy. Before the paddy is laid on the threshing floor, there are a few rites and rituals to be observed. At the very centre of the floor a small hole called a *mutta vala*<sup>6</sup> is dug and a few things such as a coil of straw, a leaf of *Crinum Asiaticum (tolabō)*, a twig of *Vitis Quadrangularis (hīrāssa)*, a small plank of margosa (*kohoṃba*), a piece of iron and a pebble called *paruvata gala* are buried, and water cented with sandalwood paste<sup>7</sup> and milk are poured into it.

5. The Sinhala peasant treats the threshing floor as sort of a sanctified place, may be because of the belief that when treated as such, he can expect more yield; cf. this piece of folk poetry (Orukmankulame Chandana - *Nuwarakālāviyē Janakavi*, Petikada Publishers, Ratmalana (1990) p. 73):

*Budun VaDina me KamataTa*  
*Sandun suvañda isirey vaTu*  
*Yodun usaTa tibenā bāta*  
*Budun anin en kamataTa*

"In this threshing floor which the Buddha may visit, there is the fragrance of sandalwood spreading around. Those (heaps of) paddy that are yojanas high, you come to the threshing floor, on orders of the Buddha".

It may be the same reason that prompts them to use a separate language while on the threshing floor.

6. In the Western region, a pole, called *kamba kanuwa*, is planted here and yoked cattle are tied to it for threshing.
7. Vide n. 5 above

At the very centre (*lasse*), a diagram called *alu yantarē* is marked with ash and a picture of a trident and some geometrical figures and the sun and the moon are drawn on it. Some people draw four tridents on the four sides of the floor. The making of these drawings is called *tirisṅlan*<sup>8</sup> *gahanava*. They believe that if these rites are not performed, the deity in charge of the earth (*polō mahī kāntāva*) will not be appeased and the yaksha (*bahiravaya*)<sup>9</sup> will take away the harvest. After these rites, the chief peasant takes the spike, which is used to gather the paddy stems that are being threshed, the sickle and the conch shell, holds them on his head and goes to the stack of paddy ears; here he takes some of the ears of paddy with both hands and places them too on his head, crosswise. Before putting them down in the centre of the threshing floor, he faces east and then circumambulates it thrice, contemplating the noble Triple Gem, gods, his parents and ancestors in gratitude, and also his wife and children, whom he has to feed. After the leader has performed these rites, the other peasants take paddy sheaves in the same way quite reverently and lay them on the floor until there is enough paddy sheaves for one threshing. They are laid in circular fashion - ears facing the centre.

When all the paddy sheaves needed for one threshing (*pāvara*) are laid down, a team of three or four cattle (*gālatilla*) is driven round and round on the paddy sheaves. Of the team of cattle, the one at the centre of the floor is the leader (*muduna*) and the outermost animal *kalā (va) teya*. When the sheaves are pushed down to the periphery by the trampling, they are again and again thrown back to the centre, which act is known as *vaTadāmilla*. If there are sheaves at the centre, not trampled by the cattle, they are pulled in and laid in the path of the cattle; this action is called *muduna kāDilla*. The whole operation of threshing is known as *kola-gongāhilla*. When the paddy is threshed the straw (*māDuvan*) and *kāTuva* (tiny parts of the threshed paddy plants) are separated by means of winnowing.

The particular jargon used on the threshing floor is more or less the same in all regions. The threshing floor is *kalaviTa*, and the various things used there have terms different from those used in common parlance. The threshing cattle are *aibaruvo* and the food eaten there is *pubbaruvo*. The spike used to gather the paddy stems is *goyya* or *ukunu gaha*. Betel chewing is called *bōl koTanava* and eating food is *koTā-bānava*. The winnowing fan is *yātura*.

8. *Trisūl* (trident) in Indian culture symbolizes protection received from the gods. e.g., "Tridents fixed to taffrails of junks to ward off evil". *Encyclopaedia of India*, Vol. III, p. 933.
9. To the peasants of the Vanni, *polōmahīkāntāva* (Goddess of Earth) is the deity in charge of the earth, and *Bahiravaya* is a yaksha who is the servant of the goddess of Earth. Paddy is raised by disturbing the earth and hence the peasants believe that the goddess must be appeased. "The idea that it is dangerous to disturb the earth or to intrude into her domain, and that when this is done, Earth must be appeased by sacrifice is a common custom". MacCulloch, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* Vol. -5, p. 130-131. *JRAS (CB)-Vol. IV* (No. 13), p. 30(1865) contains an account of *Bahirawa Yakshaya* by Dandris De Silva Gooneratne Modliar.

Once threshing is over, the measuring (*yälläma*) of the the paddy is the most important operation; this is performed very solemnly. The first measure, *akyäla*, is kept apart for the presiding deities, gods or other religious purposes. Once the *akyäla* is separated, if the farmer is the owner of the land, he gets the whole harvest minus the share for labour and the cattle, if they are hired. Sometimes a share has to be allocated for seed paddy too. If the cultivation has been on the basis of share-cropping (*añde*), half the threshed paddy goes to the owner of the land (*gam añde*).<sup>10</sup> provided he has supplied the seed paddy and the cattle for cultivation. Otherwise the land owner (*gañkārāya*) gets only one fourth of the harvest, which is called *karu añde*.

Usually women do not take part in any of the threshing floor operations. However, they bring food for those who work there, sometimes throughout the night. The boundary of the threshing floor (*kalaviTa* or *kamata*) is marked off with a *gokkōla* (tender coconut leaves) fence, and women stay outside the precinct when they come there.

This briefly is an account of the work of the cultivator (*govirāla*) during the principle cultivation season, August-September to October-November (*maha kanne*). The same is repeated for the *yala* season (March-April to May-June) too,<sup>11</sup> if the the peasants intend cultivating the fields, again a matter which depends on the availability of water, which is very doubtful in the Vanni. If paddy is not cultivated, they engage themselves in highland (*chena*) cultivation.

#### P.V. Premaratne

- 
10. *gama* in the Vanni region means 'land' and not 'village'; e.g., when the prospective bride's parents visit the prospective groom, it is known as *gañ geval balanna yāma*, which means 'going to see the groom's land and home'. In the other regions too this meaning could be noticed; cf. this popular jibe: *kañkunāTa gañ koyinda? Āy bola uge batala watta* (What land is for that fellow with the fested ear? Why, What about his sweet-potato garden?) *gāmbārāya* = steward of the lands ; *gañ naDu* = land cases
11. *Mas kanne* proper is from the full moon day of the month of *Binara* (August-September) to the full moon day of the month of *Il* (October - November); *Yala* is from the full moon day of *Bak* (March-April) to that of *Poson* (May-June). Hettiaratchi, D.E. - *Sinhala Sirit Sangrahaya* C.L. Wickremasinghe, Colombo, (1978) p. 81-82.