

Dilmah Conservation Inaugurates Programme of Dignified Empowerment of Sri Lanka's Veddahs at the 'Varigasabha' Convention

'Kahata Kola Aththo,' the Strong Tea People and the Veddah Clans of Sri Lanka

As part of ongoing support towards the Veddah Community, the first ever *Varigasabha* to be held in the Eastern Province was sponsored by Dilmah Conservation. Following is a description of the event held in July 2011



Dilmah Conservation hosted Sri Lanka's indigenous Veddah community's first traditional communal gathering or '*Varigasabha*' in the East of Sri Lanka on 30th and 31st July 2011, under the auspices of Veddah Chief Uru Warige Vannialaeththo. The *Varigasabha* traditionally brings together the Veddah community from all over Sri Lanka to discuss their issues and find solutions to the problems the community faces. For the first time, the *Varigasabha* took place this year in Vakaraï, an area that was until recently

the site of heavy fighting in the now concluded conflict that engulfed Sri Lanka's North and East. The *Varigasabha* was held to also commemorate World Indigenous Peoples' Day, and focused on the Veddah community living in the East of Sri Lanka - also known as the 'Sea Veddahs', who face difficult socio-economic conditions due to the conflict that prevailed in their traditional homeland. Today's remaining Veddahs are part of a history, some claim to be as old as 37,000 years. Of the 17 clans that are once said to have existed, only 4 remain today.

Speaking at the event, Veddah Chief Uru Warige Vannialaeththo commented "There are two things that I am happy about. One is that we were able to have the *Varigasabha* for the first time in the East. We were talking about this for a long time but it was Dilmah Conservation that helped us organize this event and we are very grateful to them. The second is that the President of Sri Lanka was able to attend this event, and we appeal to him to help resolve our issues which we have compiled in the *Varigasabha* document."

The *Varigasabha* document was handed over by the Veddah Chief to the President of Sri Lanka, His Excellency Mahinda Rajapaksa. In response to the appeal made by the Veddah Chief, the President spoke of the significance of conducting this event for the Eastern Veddah community and offered an assurance that indigenous people would receive due recognition in society. Referring to the difficulties the traditional hunter-gatherer community faces, he stated, “While protecting their culture, giving them their rightful place in society is our duty. We must strengthen their traditions. What others enjoy, they must also enjoy.”



A special guest at these events was John Collyer, an aboriginal leader from Australia and founder of Worn Gundidj Aboriginal Cooperative, a body that provides training and employment for indigenous people in Australia by helping them to develop

businesses. John Collyer attended the *Varigasabha* on the invitation of Dilmah Conservation, to build ties between the indigenous communities of Australia and Sri Lanka. Prior to the commencement of the *Varigasabha*, he addressed the Veddah community and spoke of the importance of maintaining one’s identity and marketing indigenous medicines, food, craft and the like whilst retaining the intellectual property rights. He also said, “Change is good but it must happen at one’s own pace.”

Dilmah Conservation initiated the link between the Sri Lankan and Australian indigenous communities in order to help each group learn from the experiences of the other. Several of the initiatives planned by Dilmah Conservation include the development of community based organizations amongst the Veddah community, to train and equip groups in pottery, handloom and traditional cottage industry that would feature traditional Veddah art and culture. Dilmah Conservation will also publish a book that would document the richness of the Veddah heritage, the unique sustainability factors that are part of their traditional existence, and the history, much of which is oral and not documented. Prior to the *Varigasabha*, an exhibition of Veddah items was unveiled by Dilmah founder Merrill J. Fernando, the Veddah Chief, Minister of Cultural Affairs T.B. Ekanayake and other officials. The Veddah communities also conducted special rituals including the ‘Kiri Koraha’ during and after the *Varigasabha*. The



Veddah Chief referred to family tea representatives as ‘Kahata Kola Aththo,’ which means the strong tea clan.



Veddahs, or “People of the Forest” as they call themselves, live in small communities scattered across the jungles of the remote Eastern interior and also in the coastal regions of Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the East of Sri Lanka. Their lives are steeped in tradition; they speak a unique language

company Dilmah and its of Indo-Aryan descent, follow a religion based on ancestral spirits, and perform ancient rituals and ceremonies. However due to assimilation and modernization, many of them are forced to give up their traditions and culture and have to integrate with mainstream religions and communities. Dilmah Conservation will continue to work towards uplifting this community and giving them their due recognition while preserving their vanishing traditions and culture. As stated by Dilmah founder Merrill J. Fernando, “We are committed to uplifting the quality of life and preserving and maintaining the identity of the Indigenous Veddah Community of Sri Lanka”.

