

Ahikuntaka Community Upliftment

Who are the Ahikuntaka?



Gypsies or 'Ahikuntaka' are a minority community in the country, slowly disappearing in their numbers in the face of social change and technology. It is believed that they are descendants from an ancient nomadic tribe who came to Sri Lanka from Andhra Pradesh in India many centuries ago. They now live scattered in Anuradhapura, Puttlam, Moratuwa, Galgamuwa and several other areas and are conversant in the south Indian lingo Telugu, Sinhala and Tamil.

Threatened by social change and the onset of rapid development, they are unable to find a way to fit in with the rest of society. This has led to them becoming ostracized from society and discriminated by a majority.

Their unorthodox lifestyles include shifting to a new camping ground every seven days, and vocations as snake charming and taming monkeys for performing and fortune telling.

However, due to current economic pressures, gypsies are forced to engage in daily labour to sustain themselves.

Dilmah Conservation stepped forward to empower the Ahikuntaka community by enhancing their social standards and by restoring their vanishing culture and traditions.

The project will set up a network which would enable the scattered gypsy community to communicate and share information with each other. Dilmah Conservation will provide vocational training, initiate Small Entrepreneur Programmes (SEP) and will conduct educational programmes on animal welfare for snake charmers and monkey trainers.

The cultural aspects of the community will be enhanced through the setting up of an open air theater and a cultural center which would house a permanent exhibition on traditional gypsy arts and craft and host traditional cultural events. The uniqueness of the gypsy culture will be shared with the world through a website which sponsored by Dilmah Conservation and will be periodically updated with the happenings.

A committee headed by the relevant Divisional Secretary is formed to manage this programme. The overall aim is to change and enhance public perception regarding the gypsy community, to uplift

their living standards and to revive their traditions.

A Dwindling Community

The Ahikuntaka community is historically a group of people who wander around the country from place to place, live in tents and earn a basic living by performing as snake charmers, monkey trainers and through palm reading. They also have a certain unique identity that sets them apart.

Today, they no longer live in tents as they once did. They have assimilated into the general population and live in permanent dwellings and hold various vocations, very unlike their former performing related vocation. It is not uncommon to find them working as labourers, soldiers, as tailors and even engage in selling various items in buses. In fact, it is hard to distinguish between them and other Sinhala counterparts as more often than not, they share similar names. This has happened purely out of necessity to avoid t being sidelined in society.

Although they continue to speak in their vernacular language Telengu, they are forced to converse in Sinhala as it is the common language found in schools. These children today find it necessary to obtain a higher education and shed their past lifestyle, in order to become part of the evolution their people are witnessing right now.

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As part of ongoing work with the Ahikuntaka community, Dilmah Conservation supported the *Varigasabha* held in January 2011.

Gypsy Life Eyes Dramatic Changes

Seated around a bonfire, huddled together with the leaders of their tribe, gypsy people from all corners of Sri Lanka talked of their lives, changing times and concerns that affect their very existence.

They talked of the need to preserve their unique identity that is fast disappearing.

All this took place on the banks of the Rajanganaya Tank in Kudagama, Thambuttegama on January 28, 2011, when for the first time in 60 years, a tribal meeting or *Varigasabha* brought together gypsies and their leaders from all over the country to one place.





An Account of the Varighasabha of 2011

Dilmah Conservation supported the tribal meeting or the Varigasabha to enable the community leaders to come together and discuss the issues that have befallen their community and the ways in which to address them. The meeting was preceded by an elaborate cultural ceremony that commenced with flute playing and a traditional dance by the womenfolk.

The meeting between the five community leaders namely K. Nadrajah of Kudagama, Enkatenna Masanna of Andarabedda, M. Rasakumara of Aligambe, Karupan Silva of Siriwallipuram and Anawattu Masanna of Kalawewa, was successful and paved the way for better understanding among the communities. The community leaders discussed their core issues pertaining to the lack of infrastructure development in their respective villages; lack of employment opportunities for community members and the need to ensure that their traditional forms of livelihood are secure in the time to come. They pointed out that latest developments in the housing development sector had resulted in a lack of open land for them to settle down when they roam the countryside.

They made a pledge that they will be united to strengthen and to survive their cultural identity. The first Charter of the Ahinkuntaka Community namely, 'Kudagama Charter of Sri Lanka Gypsy Community' was brought forward and the

five community leaders endorsed it on behalf of their communities. This is regarded a historic event not only for a minority community in Sri Lanka but also for the worldwide Gypsy Community.

Understanding that the identity of present and future generations of the people of Sri Lanka is defined by the communities that occupied the land in ancient times, Dilmah Conservation seeks to research and understand their cultures on the principle that doing so, helps Sri Lankans of all ethnicities understand themselves. This reality dictates that the sustainable integration of traditional communities into modern society is critically important.

Untold Aspirations

At this meeting, one of the facts observed was that it was only the views of the community elders that were brought to the forefront. It must be noted that the aspirations of youth are quite different to their elders, as they believe in changing and moving forward, in order to assimilate into society.

The youth expressed these ideas and stated that they were unable to convince their parents to understand that they need to change their lifestyles and that they cannot continue to follow traditional livelihood methods. They were also keen to progress beyond their elders and not become associated with the stigma of alcoholism associated very closely with gypsies. It was ironic that while the elders were keen on

holding onto their traditional methods, youth aspired to become ‘normal’ – they aspired to be educated, to hold meaningful employment, to be able send their children to schools and to become accepted into the society they live in.

Gypsies in the Future

Young and old members of the gypsy community may not agree entirely on the

future direction of their lives but they do share the need to be accepted into the greater community that they live in. With the assistance of Dilmah Conservation, the direction of the lives of the gypsy community in Sri Lanka will experience real change. In the future, they will have a public forum at the Kudagama compound showcase their cultural identity and shows. In addition, visitors will have the opportunity to understand the uniqueness of the Ahikuntaka community by going to the museum and viewing their artifacts.

