

In the shady groves of Muthurajawela

by a Staff
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The historic Muthurajawela stretching from Hendala to the southern edge of Negombo lagoon is one of the finest specimens of wetland bio-diversity areas. Home to thousands of species of fish, aquatic crustaceans and amphibians, birds, reptiles, insects and plant species its importance in retaining the eco-balance so necessary for the environment, has been overlooked by man in the recent past.

Due to the pressure on buildable land with the burgeoning urban communities in the northern suburbs of Colombo, Muthurajawela is now being inundated with makeshift housing lots, mostly shanties, built on filled up portions of the wetland. These settlements are characterised by the lack of proper sanitation. Bad roads, often muddied when rain falls, difficult access and poverty of their inhabitants are the features of these settlements.

Yet something thrives in most of these settlements and in the cloak of darkness, men are busy, fires are lit, heavy loads of sugar in sacks and barrels are taken behind the bushes that grow luxuriantly in the wetland. It is a veritable industry, one on the wrong side of the law.

Ingredients

Anthony, is 39 years old. He usually is dressed in full white. His face however, has an oily but pallid appearance. He is the boss of an operation in the dark night. The fires

are lit with old tyres under barrels and like an alchemist he gets his assistants, Sunil and Peter to add the ingredients to his boiling brew - sugar, yeast, half rotten plantains, some dates and a little urea thrown in for that extra

ferments for hours before it is kept on the fire and is distilled into plastic cans. There are usually about 1,000 gallons in one night's operation bringing a gross income of 30,000 rupees. Early in the morning the retailers

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Muthurajawela is criss-crossed with canals and Kasippu brewers use these to transport their product.



A haul of barrels taken from an illicit brewery in a rare raid by the police.

"kick" of the finished product, commonly called Kasippu or Suduwaa.

The entire area is dark. The smoke from the old tyres irritate the sleeping inmates of the shanties. The sick or the children start coughing. But none dares to complain. The industry employs several persons - young or old. Even children are employed. The brew

come to meet Anthony with their plastic cans. Before dawn the sale is over, Anthony's pockets are bulging with cash and the retailers, some of them on pedal cycles, some on motor bikes and still others on foot are off to their own sales outlets.

Sunil, one of the assistants once saw a snake inside the brew. Attracted by the smell, it had crept into the bar-

rel only to be intoxicated and drowned in the brew. Sunil said that he detected the decomposed snake's skeleton only after the brew was distilled and sold to the customers!

Common sight

This man's name was Ukkun. He was also called Dola Ukkun as he was a drummer who could play the Dolak and Tablas very

well. At that time the well-known musician M.K. Rocksamy was living in Hendala and Ukkun was a frequent visitor to the musician's home. But Ukkun could play the drums when he had a good drink. He, however, started drinking too hard. Kasippu was his favourite. In the late thirties he became an addict. He would begin his day around dawn

with the first drink from one of the outlets. He had been first afflicted with cirrhosis when he was forty. After the second affliction two years later, he never lived to tell the tale.

It is a very common sight to see the addicts leaving their homes around six in the morning to visit the outlets for their cup of "bed tea" and for the last cup of the day even at 10.00 p.m. Business is good and Anthony now has a Japanese made van, an upstairs home, all the gadgetry of modern living and his staff has increased to more than ten people. In each lane, bylane and settlement, the retailers are doing good business.

How do these brewers and their retailers escape the law. Anthony and others like him have, "friends" in the police or the excise. The friends are given bonuses from the profits of the business and in turn these friends among the law keepers look after Anthony.

However, once in a while the police raid one of the retail outlets. But of course the date of the raid is "advised" beforehand. So the retailer will keep only a pint or two of the hooch and one person is arrested and produced in court.

A fine of Rs.500 or Rs. 1000 is levied and is easily paid by the retailer.

The killer brew, making families destitute, youth old before their age, and whole communities miserable is thriving despite the efforts of the social, political and religious leaders to eradicate the menace. There are several 'entrepreneurs' like Anthony who are thriving because they are hand in glove with key local law keepers and even with some law makers.