

Research Proposal: The Veddas', the Indigenous people of Sri Lanka, attitude on cultural heritage identification after relocation from their forest homeland

Abstract- Sri Lanka's indigenous people, the *Veddas* (forest-dwellers), have inhabited Sri Lanka's monsoon dry forest for at least 16,000 years and probably much longer. Hunting and gathering was their main means of living. Accordingly their foods were meat, birds, eggs, honey, fish, fruit, and vegetables.

After independent from British government, many development projects were implemented by the Sri Lankan government. The accelerated *Mahaweli* river development project which was the largest development program ever in Sri Lankan history, was commenced in 1977.

As the Accelerated *Mahaweli* Development Project evolved, the old "*Veddas*' Country" was segmented into "systems" labelled with alphabetic designations: so called system A,B and C, and colonized with indigenous *Vedda* population and ordinary people who wish to settle down from rest of the country. The plan called for the last portion of tropical forest inhabited by the indigenous people of Sri Lanka to become colonies and Wildlife Reserve catchments area. Approximately five thousand three hundred men, women, and children were forced to resettle into three different systems.

For the past 30 years these displaced group of *Veddas* have struggled to live in these colonies. Their cultural heritage was influenced by the neighbouring cultures. The original occupants of the country are suffering a cultural decline. Many traditions are rapidly vanishing. The rituals to the gods and spirits, the great and important annual ceremonies, have become rare. The rock arts, bow and arrow, traditional costumes are no longer visible. The proposed research is to study their thoughts and understandings about their present cultural heritage identification, and then to understand any differences about their thoughts due to forced colonization. The research result is helpful for anybody to refer before considering any diversion of the natural flow of indigenous people's life in the world, in case.

Index Terms- Vedda, Indigenous people, Indigenous culture, forest-dwelling, Relocation of Indigenous people

I. INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka's indigenous people, the *Veddas* (forest-dwellers), have inhabited Sri Lanka's semi-evergreen monsoon dry forest for at least 16,000 years and probably much longer. Even though the *Veddas* were the first people in Sri Lanka, they have never controlled the country since the Indian immigrants were settled in Sri Lanka about 2500 years ago. In fact, the early immigrants were of the opinion that the forest-dwelling *Veddas* were not human beings but wild jungle spirits who were human in outward guise only. Such negative attitudes towards the island's indigenous people persist up to the present day; make them to be categorized as backward, deceivable, illiterate and

uncivilized people whose point of view may be conveniently ignored. These categorizations lead to ignore the recognition of these native people's self-respect, dignity, human rights and cultural heritage.

The *Veddas* are proud of their distinct heritage and call themselves "Vannialettho" which means "those of the forest". The term "*Vedda*" was donated by the Sinhalese neighbors. The word "*Vedda*" comes from the Sanskrit language "*Vyadda*" which means the hunter with bow and arrow. The pure *Veddas*, unlike the Sinhalese who speak Indo-Aryan language and claim Aryan decent, are related to the Austro - Asiatic people found scattered today in many part of southern Asia. These include the aboriginal tribes of *Chota Nagpur* in eastern India such as the *Hos* and *Birhos*, the Sakai of Malaysia, the *Kubu* of Indonesia and the Australian Aborigines. (Deraniyagala 1992:392).

The *Veddas* live in Eastern province located east of the central mountain massif in Sri Lanka. The towns closest to the *Vedda* settlements are *Maha Oya* to the east and *Mahiyangana* to the west. Along the *Maha Oya* road twenty kilometers from *Mahiyangana*, is the village of *Dambana*. The landscape of *Vedda* country is green, crossed by ever flowing rivers and streams and through reservoirs and water tanks. Out of the 20 million people of Sri Lanka, there are approximately 5000 indigenous people remains.

Hunting and gathering was their main means of living. Accordingly their foods were meat, birds, eggs, honey, fish, fruit, and vegetables. Role of gathering practices by *Vedda* women contributed more to the family's daily food supply than men's' hunting practices. Many hunting and gathering peoples practice some form of agriculture called *chena* cultivation to supplement the foods collected in the wild. In *chena* cultivation, they clear small plots of land from the forest, cultivate them by hand for one or two years. After this period they keep abandoned those lands for longer period. This system of agriculture is well suited to the coexistence of man and the forest. Abandoned

After independent from British government, many development projects were implemented by the Sri Lankan government. Between 1951 and 1955, Sri Lanka instituted the *Gal Oya* project which drastically affected the *Vedda* in the eastern region. *Gal Oya* is a river which flows from hilly area in the middle of the country to the eastern sea through *Veddas*' habitat. The project built the country's largest reservoir at *Inginiyagala* and inundated some of the *Veddas*' best hunting and food gathering areas along with several of their favorite cave dwellings. The government wanted to resettle those *Veddas* into colonies, but, the *Veddas* chose to survive by retreating further into the forest. (Dharmadasa 1990:36).

The accelerated *Mahaweli* development project which was the largest development program ever in Sri Lankan history, was commenced in 1977. This plan provided that the longest

river in the country, the 335 km. long *Mahaweli* River, would be developed, channeled, and diverted into tunnels to produce electricity, then guided to reservoirs and canals for artificial irrigation. About 640,000 acres of formerly "undeveloped" land would be opened for cultivation. The project would provide new agricultural lands and homesteads for 140,000 families (Keuneman 1983: 64). The plan called for the last portion of tropical forest inhabited by the indigenous people of Sri Lanka to become colonies and Wildlife Reserve catchments area. As the Accelerated *Mahaweli* Development Project evolved, the old "Veddass' Country" was segmented into "systems" labeled with alphabetic designations. The northern half of the forest belonged to System B (north of the river *Maduru Oya*) and the south-western half to System C. The trees were logged, and the hunting grounds and traditional honey bee sites were leveled by bulldozers. The *Veddass* Country underwent dramatic change into vast areas of rice-paddy cultivation, towns, villages, highways, and infrastructure. Thousands of people were resettled into the area. Eleven thousand hectares of hunting ground were inundated.

The government plan was also to establish a system of national parks stretching from borders of these new colonies towards the eastern beaches. This would form a chain of islets of natural sanctuaries. On November 9, 1983, the home-land of the *Veddass* measuring approximately 51468 hectares was designated as the *Maduru Oya* National Park administered by the *Mahaweli* Environmental Authority. (Dharmadasa 1990:50).

Barriers, guards, and outposts were stationed along the borders. No one could enter the park without a written permission from the Wildlife Department located in the capital, Colombo, on the other side of the country. Most *Veddass* cannot read and write. From one day to the next their ancient livelihood became criminal in the eyes of the law. Yesterday's hunters and gatherers are today's poachers. Since they were not allowed to carry out the only subsistence they knew they finally went to the government for help. They learned that they could no longer collect food as in the past. The forest-dwellers must abide by the government's plan to cut the trees, blast through the mountains, and dig ditches in their hunting grounds. They were told they could never again return to their traditional life in the forest. The waters of the rivers were diverted for rice paddies, and their hunting grounds now were reserved for wildlife.

Thus it was that the majority of the last nine hundred *Veddass* families who still remained in the forest have finally been evicted. Approximately five thousand three hundred men, women, and children were forced to resettle into three different districts, splitting up their community and destroying the highly-integrated social structure on which the *Veddass* traditionally depend. These resettlement areas are situated outside the forest, in rice-growing areas totally unfamiliar to the *Veddass* and unsuitable for their traditional small scale agriculture. The forest beings are now considered trespassers in their own forest. (Obeysekara 1990:26). A smaller number of *Vedda* families, which the government authorities missed to identify or uncounted due to practical reasons were living in virtual forests. The original occupants of the country are suffering a cultural decline. Many traditions are rapidly vanishing. The rituals to the gods and spirits, the great and important annual ceremonies, have become rare. The rock arts, bow and arrow, traditional costumes

are no longer visible. Indeed, these are precisely the elements of their cultural heritage that the *Veddass* are most anxious to preserve for future generations.

For the past 25 years these displaced group of *Veddass* have struggled to live in these colonies. Their cultural heritage was influenced by the neighboring cultures. Today only a few remaining *Veddass* still manage to preserve their cultural identity despite relentless pressure from the surrounding dominant communities.

The proposed research is to study their thoughts and understandings about their present cultural heritage identification, and then to understand any differences about their thoughts due to forced colonization. The research result is helpful for any body to refer before considering diverting the natural flow of indigenous people's life in the world, in case.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars have done studies on original *Vedda* people who still live in jungles and follow hunter – gather life style. But there is only a few studies conducted on this colonized group of *Veddass*. Most of these published and unpublished research articles and reports are required to be studied to examine others views on this subject. Furthermore, there are government official policies of Sri Lanka introduced on indigenous people so far since the country's independence. These policies need to be studied and reassessed to see whether these were correctly implemented in working with indigenous people. Further it will be discussed how these policies influence on cultural heritage identification of these people.

Wiveca Stegeborn, an indigenous anthropologist at the Department of the social Anthropology at the University of Tromsø in Norway, has done a series of researches on original *Veddass* and the colonized *Veddass*. She has lived with the *Veddass* since 1977, is the only outsider who speaks *Vedda's* language. She has devoted her life to their cause. In a paper published by her on the topic "Indigenous People, Nature Conservation and Human Rights – A Case study of *Veddass* of Sri Lanka", she made a lengthy discussion on all sociological aspects of the colonized *Veddass* (Stegeborn Wiveca 1997:18).

But she has mentioned little about what these people think of their cultural heritage after colonization. A review on this article will help to have a good understanding on the social background of the colonized *Veddass*

There is another paper written by Lund Ragnhild on the topic. "Geographies of Eviction, Expulsion and Marginalization: Stories and Coping Capacities of the *Veddass*, Sri Lanka" to the *Norwegian Journal of Geography*.

This paper identifies why the *Veddass* have been exposed to forced relocation and marginalization at various historical junctures. Their history is a dramatic story of eviction and marginalization. The key concepts of marginalization and eviction are discussed in relation to an analytical model illustrating how external and internal factors, collective capabilities and individual characteristics interact on people's coping capacity. *Veddass* in two villages have given accounts of their understanding of the situation. He conclude that the decline of the *Vedda's* thoughts on their cultural heritage is due to ignorance and the unwillingness of the Sri Lankan government

to secure an enabling environment that would improve the handling capacity of its indigenous population. This paper will help to review the history of *Vedda* colonization in Sri Lanka.

Professor K.N.O. Dharmadasa, has done a major research on forest dwelling *Veddas* in Sri Lanka. In his book "The Vanishing Aborigines" (1990), there are many details on the cultural heritage for forest dwelling *Veddas*.

The following researches, articles and papers are also worth referring during a research.

- *Colonial Histories and Vedda Primitivism* by Professor Gananath Obeyesekere (1990)
- *Pre history of Sri Lanka* by Deraniyagala S.U (1985)
- *Memories of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon* by Hocart A.M (1924)
- *Insight Guides, Sri Lanka & Hong Kong* by Keuneman Herbert and Anderson.G(1983).

In addition to the research reports, the following documentations made by this *Vedda* group, will be examined to find any reference to the cultural heritage aspects.

- Any complains to the Government
- Any complains to the NGOs
- Any complains to the media and other sources.

III. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

With the start of accelerated *Mahaweli* development project, about 900 *Vedda* families were relocated in two colonies closer to the forest. Each family was issued two hector yards of land and a house: a piece of land was for rice and vegetable cultivation.

The former hunter and gathers have now become rice cultivators and vegetarians. The old forest dwelling *Veddas* talk about their cultural heritage proudly and respectfully. Their traditional ritual practices, folk songs, stories, dances, cults and beliefs, clothing, rock arts, weapons, are some of the identifications which are considered as their cultural heritage. From generation to generation, elders transfer the knowledge on cultural heritage to their youngsters.

When discussing the cultural heritage identification of these colonized *Veddas*, three major age groups in this society can be focused on. First age group is who were born in these colonies: that is the group of age below 30 years. The second group is the people from 30 to 60 years old, who spend approximately half of their lives in the forest and rest in the colony. The final group contains the people above 60 years old who spent larger part of their life in the forest. As mentioned above, living environment influences their cultural heritage, it can be expected some differences of thoughts and identifications on cultural heritage in these colonized *Vedda* groups.

The aim of this research is to identify these deviations and differences in cultural heritage identification of this society due to this colonization. The results can be compared with the cultural heritage identity of forest dwelling *Veddas*. Many researches have already been done on cultural heritage identification of forest *Veddas*.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The proposed research method is "Focus Group" concept. Due to following reasons it is accepted that this research method will be the most effective methodology in the research.

- The previous researches on this colonized *vedda* society have proved that focus group method was generating qualitative data on the basis of group interaction and discussion
- As they speak different language it is required to have a service of an interpreter. It is not practicable to have this service for a long period of time: so the research needs to be completed within a short period of time.
- The problems and difficulties in their new life style are always subjected to discussions in group environment whenever they get together. So having group discussions instead of individual interviews will create more realistic results.

It is expected to select three groups for this focus group research. Each group will include the volunteers and may contain 5-10 people. Volunteers will be selected to minimize the risk of fault and fabricated answering.

The first group will be between the ages 20-30, so that the entire participants who were born in this colony will be allocated to a group. They have no experience in forest life. The majority is expected to be modernized and mixed with neighboring cultures. At least some of them must have exposed to the modern civil society, and can speak Sinhalese language other than their traditional *Vedda* language. So researcher can directly talk to them with a minimum service of an interpreter.

The second age group is from 30 to 60 years. The majority of the participant in this group must have lived half of their lives in forest and the rest in this colony. Unlike the first group, this second group should have good understanding on the forest *Vedda's* cultural heritage. It is expected that an enough number of participants can be found as volunteers. The government records and previous researches by scholars have shown that the majority of the population in these colonies belongs to this age group. For the better response during this focus group discussion it is required to have a service of an interpreter.

The aged people above 60 years will be included in the third focus group. This group has lived more than a half of their life as forest *Veddas*. Most of them would be the leaders who have led their protest against forced colonization. It can be believed that their feelings on the *Vedda's* cultural heritage are more likely as forest *Veddas*.

In this *Vedda* community, they have formed an action committee who organize their protest to the government against their forced relocation. This committee talks to the government agent of this province, and other non-government organizations. Once a month, there is a meeting between this committee and the government officials. It is required to inform the government agents of these areas regarding the research details, by which researcher can be introduced to the *Veddas'* action committee. During the focus group discussions, it is required to audio record the discussion and take short notes of their answers and there body language and behaviors, ensuring all the participants are given the opportunity to voice their comments. At the end of the

focus group discussion a summary of the discussion can be noted down on the spot.

V. DATA ANALYSIS

Tape – based analysis will be more suitable to this research data analysis, as the participants speak different language. In addition to the translations done by the interpreter during the discussions, a second translation of the audio tapes will be done with the help of another translator to minimize the errors during translation. This translation will be noted down for data analysis. Finally all these audio tapes, translations, field notes and summaries are required to be examined to prepare the results of the research

The major topics identified by each group as their cultural heritage will be separated and listed down. The reasons forwarded for their identifications are also noted by the side of the list.

All the information will be categorised and sorted into following topics for each group.

- Major ideas forwarded by a group as their cultural heritage
- Reasons for these identifications
- Minor ideas on their cultural heritage
- What they heard as their elders cultural heritage
- What are the things a group does and does not like to hear as cultural heritage
- What are topics a group does and does not want to continue as cultural heritage to the next generation

VI. ETHICAL ISSUES

Before starting of the focus group research it is needed to obtain the written approval from the Ministry of Environment and cultural affairs, Sri Lanka.. Any local law enforcing authorities and village headmen are also be informed to avoid any unforeseen situations.

When selecting participants, It is required to ensure that full information about the purpose of the research, role of participants, and use of collected data, are given to the participants and their action committee.

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PHOTOS . INDEGINIOUS PEOPLE OF SRI LANKA – VEDDAS

