

## SRI LANKA

Sri Lanka is home to diverse indigenous cultures that have combined to influence its societal make-up for over two thousand years. Of these, the historically recognized *Vyadha* (“huntsmen/archers”) or *Vadda*, as they are now commonly referred to, were among diverse other social or occupational indigenous groups who served a defined role, recognised by royal decree, and who owed allegiance to the King.<sup>1</sup> With European colonisation, however, the different indigenous groups, including the Vadda, came under threat as a result of social transformations that ended up isolating them. The norm among European and other travel writers of the colonial era was to depict hunter-gatherer groups such as the Vadda as “uncivilised” or “barbarous”. The Vadda comprise independent groups who originally co-existed alongside their non-Vadda neighbours and were once widespread in the south-eastern and eastern coastal belt, the northern tracts and the central part of the island where they are, however, less known.<sup>2</sup> Of these, a comparatively few Vadda groups – particularly those of the south-east - are recognised by certain cultural traits, such as *varige* (Sinhala term for clan name) and ancestor worship.<sup>3</sup> The majority, however, compare with their neighbours, the long-term Sinhalese sedentary agriculturalists, and some with Tamil-speaking populations. While colonial census reports portrayed the Vadda people as a distinct ethnic group and gave population figures of between 1,229 and 4,510 people, census surveys of the last three decades have not distinguished them as a separate ethnic group.<sup>4</sup>

## Current issues

The Vadda, as traditional forest-dwelling hunters, are suffering from extreme poverty as a result of state interventions since the European colonial and post-colonial era, for example, modern development schemes (including forced resettlement) and the establishment of conservation policies that ignore the intrinsic sustainability of Vadda lifeways.<sup>5</sup> Their enforced adaptation to mainstream scenarios has adversely affected the once free-spirited Vadda people, their traditional lifeways and cultural values, and has intensified their marginalisation and enhanced their dependency. Their primary occupation of hunting is now prohibited by national law. In some cases, where protected forest resources are used by forest-dependent communities, including the Vadda, arrests are made and major conflicts and legal battles ensue between the stakeholder groups. One key livelihood transition has been the adoption of sedentary agricultural practices. This shift has led to an increased dependency on external inputs, e.g., chemical fertilisers and pesticides, and has restricted access to seasonal water sources. As a result, the traditional livelihood strategies of the Vadda, which helped to preserve forest resources, are being eroded. The price the Vadda people has paid is a high one. They are facing undue pressures and are struggling to maintain livelihood security. An erosion of traditional values, in exchange for material aspirations, influenced by external economic, socio-cultural and religious influences, is distinctly evident.

The rights of the Vadda people are incorporated within broader national policies focused on the rights of forest-dependent communities in general. These policies have deprived traditional forest-dwellers such as the Vadda people of their economic mainstay and livelihood through displacement and a denial of the right to access forest resources.

## Policy advocacy

The Inter-Agency Working Group on the Livelihood Recovery of Traditional/Indigenous Forest-Dwelling People (IWGLRIP-2005) was established in response to the livelihood insecurities being experienced



by modern forest-dependent communities. The Working Group committee, facilitated by the United Nations Development Programme/Global Environment Facility-Small Grant Programme (UNDP/GEF-SGP), comprises representatives from the Biodiversity Secretariat of the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (BS-MENR) and the Centre for Eco-Cultural Studies (CES), operating as the joint secretariat, and the

Department of Wildlife Conservation (DWLC).

The Working Group's main objective is to facilitate the recovery of forest livelihoods and to preserve associated traditional knowledge systems. The process is being carried forward through negotiations between the various stakeholders aimed at proactive change in order to overcome the barriers forest communities are presently facing in interacting with their natural environment. These stakeholders include local, district, regional and national government agencies, non-governmental organizations and private concerns such as entrepreneurs. While tackling this as a key theme, national and international agendas such as the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the much publicised Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), for example, are also being addressed.

In the spirit of the International Decade for Indigenous Peoples, developments for the establishment of the National Policy on Traditional Knowledge (NPTK) were set in motion in 2003. The NPTK and

its associated strategies were finally declared on 9 August 2007, a day recognised internationally for the celebration of indigenous peoples. Pre-existing policies, such as the National Biodiversity Action Plan and National Forest Policy, have already highlighted the importance of preserving traditional knowledge practices and their associated communities. However, the NPTK exists as a government policy solely dedicated to the promotion and facilitation of traditional knowledge, and to the maintenance of the eco-cultural well-being of indigenous communities that have nurtured such wisdom for thousands of years.

### **Model programme on livelihood recovery**

A model for the livelihood recovery of forest-dependent Vadda communities has been established through the IWGLRIP in Ratugala. Ratugala is included, along with six other traditionally forest-dependent and/or displaced forest-dwelling communities, in a five-year-long programme under Phase I. The seven areas included are: Ratugala: environs of Gal Oya National Park (Monaragala District), Pollebadda: environs of Nuvaragala Forest Reserve (Ampara District), Dambana: environs of Maduru Oya National Park (Badulla District), Henanigala: environs of Maduru Oya National Park (Ampara District), Gallinda, Rotavava and Minneriya: environs of Sigiriya Wildlife Sanctuary, Minneriya-Giritale Nature Reserve and Minneriya-Giritale National Park (Polonnaruwa District), Dimbulagala and environs; environs of Flood Plains National Park and Vasmamuva National Park (Polonnaruwa District), Panama: environs of Kumana Wildlife Sanctuary, Yala and Lahugala-Kitulana National Parks (Monaragala District)

This pilot programme in Ratugala serves as a model applied action research programme through which to establish guidelines for Phase I, selected on a priority needs basis, identified by the local community and jointly implemented by its representative local society. It endeavours to protect the rights of traditional forest-dwelling communities and promotes sustainable alternative economic practices while addressing Article 8j of the CBD for equitable sharing of the benefits of biodiversity. Furthermore, it endorses planned initiatives for socio-economic enhancement and cultural and environmental conservation

through participatory community initiatives for direct, long-term benefits to the communities concerned. The pilot programme has so far come up with the following recommendations:

- To minimize conflicts of interest between stakeholders such as protected area managers and forest peoples
- To minimize the adverse effects of community dependency on protected areas
- To establish “eco-cultural” villages to provide alternative means of livelihood
- To set up documentation methods for traditional knowledge practices related to natural resource management .
- To establish a community interpretation programme on traditional cultures and scaling up of existing facilities
- To empower and enhance the skills of local forest-dwelling communities
- To set up a mechanism for equitable sharing of benefits from protected areas and bio-prospecting
- To establish a market for the sale of non-timber forest products
- To set up a financial assistance mechanism for re-acquiring community properties
- To raise awareness and address issues of social and community health concerns
- To address gender issues.

The programmes hitherto established through multi-stakeholder initiatives and proactive participation also involve the local communities that depend on protected forest resources. The multi-partite organisational network established nationally and regionally has paved the way for a constructive dialogue. Wider stakeholder participation in planning, implementing, monitoring and restructuring, in accordance with national interests and local benefits, is the key success achieved so far. Conflicts of interest between the stakeholders, involving government institutes and local forest-dwelling communities, are negotiated via the IWGLRIP in order to minimise them, with priority given

to forest people's livelihood recovery through recognition of community rights, as custodians of the forest ecosystems in which they live.

The stakeholders of the pilot programme in Ratugala, comprising two Vadda representatives from Pollebadda and Dambana, representatives of the BS-MENR, DWLC, CES and UNDP/GEF-SGP, participated in the Regional Dialogue on Indigenous Peoples and Natural Resource Management, held in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 10 to 14 November 2007. This consultation was part of a process initiated in 2005 through the Regional Initiative on Indigenous Peoples. Its aim was to identify the gaps and opportunities existing at regional level in order to better address the urgent issue of natural resources, land and climate change. The involvement of the Sri Lankan participants in Chiang Mai has since opened up regional networks and a "way forward", with plans to set up a National Dialogue in Sri Lanka in early 2008, using the model in question. □

## Notes & References

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- 4 **Ranasinghe, A.G., 1950:** Census of Ceylon 1946. Vol. 1. Part I, *General Report by Department of Census and Statistics*. Colombo: Government Press. pp. 161-162.
- 5 **Stavenhagen, R., 1990:** The Plight of the Indigenous. *The Vanishing Aborigines: Sri Lanka's Veddas in Transition*. Edited by Dharmadasa, K.N.O. and S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe. Colombo: International Centre for Ethnic Studies. pp.17-20, 22; **Dharmadasa, K.N.O., 1990:** The Veddas' Struggle for Survival: Problems, Policies and Responses. *The Vanishing Aborigines: Sri Lanka's Veddas in Transition*. Edited by Dharmadasa, K.N.O. and S.W.R. de A. Samarasinghe. pp.141, 165-166.

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