SHORT COMMUNICATION

DADAYAMPOLA TODAY

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Barren Hillsides to Lush Vegetation.

Last March 2004, the road through Hanguranketa was even drier than in drought-ridden Kandy. Barren hillsides presented mute evidence of earlier feeble endeavours to chena-cultivate the heavily eroded soils. Gradually, however, the brown turned green, as nearing Walapena contoured terraces of trees took over, like the splash of an artist's brush over a coarse canvas. Proceeding further towards Dadayampola, a hamlet within the Nildhandahinna valley, a fresh new climate appeared to prevail.

I was trying to locate the hillside (Figure 01) where, a decade earlier, the SALT (Sloping-Agricultural-Land-Technology) program of the Upper-Mahaweli Authority had, with field-officers of the CTC (Ceylon Tobacco Company), endeavoured to train farmers to transform such eroded soils into sustainably farmed terrain. I wished to see for myself how their

lands might have progressed over that period,...and how their homesteads were evolving (Figure 2). But now I could not find the site... it all looked very different!

After futile endeavours to locate that particular hillside (which I was still sure I knew well!) we stopped to ask a farmer who was carrying a bundle of cuttings. He pointed back over his shoulder at the now thickly forested slope and guided us up a steep pathway to his home. The transformation was unbelievable! Tall *Gliricidia* and *Accacia* trees now covered the land with the terraced slopes between them yielding lush crops.... a variety of vegetables and fruits, with banana leaves waving gently over them. The profuse leaf-growth from the trees above had mulched the slopes as sole source of rich (green) manure for the crops now cultivated on the contoured avenues between them. The woody stems were lopped for fuel-wood for which there was now a steady market.

Figure 01: Barren and eroded hillsides; a decade ago

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Figure 02: Homesteads beginning, surrounded by Gliricidia and Accacia terraces to restore the soil with their leaf mulch.

Figure 03: Now, two years later, homesteads completed, amidst lush growth of fertility-restoring trees on well farmed slopes which also supply fuel-wood to Walapane.

From his house (Figure 03) we looked down, and even the main-road below now resembled an avenue in Colombo. I could hardly believe it!

We asked the farmer how recently the rains had started. He looked at us, puzzled, and then replied “Mahathmaya, me mulu yaayata dhang kisi idoriak nehe.” (Sir, this entire valley does not experience droughts now.) We were truly dumb-founded.. it was unbelievable!.. But the crops on this once barren and eroded hill-side were living testimony to his reponse.

He showed us his well which now had water in it... despite it still being mid-March and dry throughout the rest of the district. Returning to the main road we asked other farmers in that valley area how they were living, and they confirmed, “Yes we do not now experience droughts”.

And as we reached Hanguranketa and Kandy, the increasing heat of the drought struck us once again. Only that Yaaya at Dadayampola remained green and cool.

My partner on that trip to Dadayampola, a very experienced engineer, was silent and in thought. I asked him what he thought of what we had just seen. His reply....“I come from the rubber-growing area near Mathugama, but throughout that Dadayampola haen-yaaya, I got the same feeling of coolness.... just like driving through a rubber estate. I hope they never, ever, remove those trees in the rubber-growing districts... It is clear to me that it is those trees which we must thank for never having to experience drought in Mathugama.”

That entire district around Walapane now grows *Gliricidia* and a variety of other trees which are regularly pruned to supply fuel-wood rotationally to the

1000 kW Lanka-Transformers generating station at Walapane... the first major fuel-wood generating station in Sri Lanka. Their lush leaf-growth had been spread over the intervening avenues to manure the crops as had earlier been demonstrated at Dadayampola. The farmers appear to be doing very well indeed, with two sources of regular income; from their well manured crops as well as from the sale of fuel-wood. An oasis was gradually spreading throughout the once barren district.

I had often been told that the dense growing of trees could well develop its own micro-climate to attract sustained rainfall... but I never quite believed it.... until seeing it myself!