

Finding a Roof

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It was still night, stars and all-when I got up with a sense of adventure in my bones. The air was warm, mid April, and out there, somewhere, the reed waited to be harvested for our new roof. It was going to happen today - the first step in the chain of events that would result in a beautiful, Japanese style thatch roof.

For some reason, it felt great, driving my bike up along the East Coast Road in the dark. I wasn't the only one up/ The Tamil villages are astir as early as 4.30 in the morning in a quiet sort of way. The kind of quiet that even the early morning temple speakers don't touch.

Half an hour later I picked up the outline of the tractor, and as I got closer there they were, sipping hot sweet tea, Palani and the boys. Five in the morning is when this tea is at it's best. Some other times of the day, it is almost undrinkable. Now the sky started to get light. Time to leave the main road and head down the white clay ribbon leading into this forever reservoir, finally dry enough to take the tractor load. Sambu, it's called, this round, sponge-centered reed. Dry, it gets a pale golden ochre. In the reservoir called Kallivelli Tank, it stretches from horizon to horizon, and, as the light grows, and the birds lift out of it, alarmed by the intruders, it turns into a golden, rippling ocean. I catch myself dreaming of giraffes and wilderbeasts-as if the landscape demanded that kind of wildlife. However, the Kallivelli reservoir is blessed with no such animals, I remind myself, as the ragged clay under my wheels jolt the bike to a stop. The last kilometers have to be done on foot. The tractor, following the white ribbon, makes a wide detour of the dry reed patches. Finally the harvesters appear as dark dots in the landscape, and eventually, tractor, the helpers, the harvesters

and I all converge and the silence is broken. The reed growing in the reservoir is divided into patches and owned by families from the nearby villages. The old man and his wife awaiting us had made bundles of Sambu for us to take away, and I was there to inspect them and discuss the price. There was another younger couple there as well, standing back and observing the scene. I wish this could be a simple task, one that did not tear me out of the magic of the visuals that was stunning my brain: the colors of dawn, beautiful people, golden earth...

But when it comes down to business, there is no room for magic. The bundles shown to me started out by being a good size, then quickly dwindled to a little over half the size after the first couple of hundreds. I was here to buy six thousand bundles and to be ripped off big time if I didn't wipe that smile of early morning bemusement off my face, harden my throat and use every shred of the local language I have mastered over the last 42 years. Turns out it was the women who had the idea-how clever. They probably hadn't counted on the buyer being a woman herself. The drama followed it's due course and ended with an agreement. Three bundles for the price of two whenever I deemed them undersized. That meant detailed supervision of the loading of three trailers, each 3000 bundles.

When that was over, everyone grinned at each other happily, and we moved on to the fun part of the morning, passing up the bundles to the expert loaders, and the stack on the trailer grew and grew until I thought it would topple over at the slightest wobble. At 8.30, we were ready to roll. As I walked back to the bike, tummy rumbling for breakfast, I looked over my shoulder to see the tractor inch it's way across the reservoir, looking like a tiny toy on the horizon. Back on the East Coast Road there would be nice hot idlies for us all...

The Steps

Step One

Making bundles out of the Veryl grass.

The Veryl, unlike the Sambu, is a grass. It is harvested in smaller reservoirs inland. It has cutting edges, and leaves the skin with an itching rash due to some tiny insects locally known as Sone. The bundles made by the harvesters have to be re-bundled combining two into one, and cleaning out the small stuff. It's a hell of a job that my workers refused to do. When I realized that I was going to get no help from even the 'bundlers' from the distant villages, and was risking ending up with a huge heap of fermented straw, I sat down and started bundling myself. This convinced my workers and we ended up doing the job of re-bundling 12,000 bundles to make 6,000 bundles.

This Veryl is known to have a longer life span on the roof than the Sambu. But it is harder to treat, as it has no sponge like interior to absorb the copper sulfate solution.

Inspired by the thatch roofs in Japan, I had decided to do a double-layered roof. Sambu under Veryl. I would treat the Sambu, with copper sulfate solution. This is a mild fungicide, and its acrid taste discourages rodents and other gnawing creatures. Considering the fact that Tamil Nadu is blessed with a special fungus that destroys any organic material with ferociousness unknown in other parts of this country, treating the reed and the grass only makes sense. Next, I would treat the Veryl with a mixture of copper sulfate and alum. And hope for the best.

The cost of labor to re-bundle the Veryl, as well as the price of the grass itself came to about three times that of the Sambu, which can be

used as it comes from the harvesters.

Step Two

Preparing the border

Two thatching masters came to do the work. They were the same masters who had done my previous simple thatch roof. This had been good for seven years. The masters had never done a double layer two-foot thick roof before. Also they had to get used to the flat horizontal finish of the bottom edge of the roof. Traditionally the roofs end in a diagonal edge, which allows the water to run down the entire breadth of the roof. In the case of the 'Japanese' roof, the water simply runs off the edge.

Step Three

Laying the double layer in strips, starting from the bottom. First, one strip of Sambu, then, one strip of Veryl. The thatch is 'stiched' on with a three-foot needle, the local date palm center, and a thin casuarinas pole. The date palm center is a strong fiber, locally known as 'kassanga' and used for attaching all sorts of roofing materials to the under structures. The thin casuarinas pole is used to hold down the thatch, like a hair clip holds down the hair, it is fastened to the roof structure with the kassanga, which is passed from the outside through to the inside and back out with the help of the three foot steel needle. No one's ever done this before, and we're all thrilled at how it's working.

Step Four

The Japanese looking ridge

So I had all these photos of solid looking ridges. Around these parts, the

ridge is nothing more than some loose straw laid across the ridge and held down with a couple of bamboo poles. The 'Japanese' ridges, however, were the most imposing element of the roof. The masters, the team and I all looked at the pictures from Japan and tried to figure out how this could be done. I had done some thinking previously as well, and had prepared some material. For example wide black nylon bands stitched together to form loops. Through these loops we would stick split bamboo reapers. There would be ten bands per roof (we have two roofs; and with bamboo reapers eight meters long it would make a sort of bamboo mat that we could lay across the thatch ridge. However, the making of the ridge in a tall rounded form was still a challenge that remained to be solved by the team. This is when I love the confidence that these people emanate. 'Don't worry,' they say, 'we will do it.' However I insisted on going through the process verbally. And finally we all agreed on the 'how'. During the roof laying, there was a lot of loose straw all over the place that got collected and bundled into 'loose' bundles. These went on first to give bulk to the ridge. This was attached to steel rods that were stuck through the top of the roof structure, just under the ridge. These steel rods would also be the anchors of the black straps holding the bamboo reapers. However, they also served us to tie down, with coconut rope, the different layers we were putting on the ridge first. Covering the 'loose' bundles went a layer of sambu, laid across the top like a fan. Then came a final layer of Veryl, densely packed, and once all this was secured to the steel rods, we faced the challenge of lifting the bamboo mat, that was to pin it all down securely and give it a finished look.

Step five

The feast

The roof finished, everyone gathered in the evening for a feast of chicken curry, rice, beer and sweets. Then the rains came down in torrents, and we sent everyone home in a taxi.

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