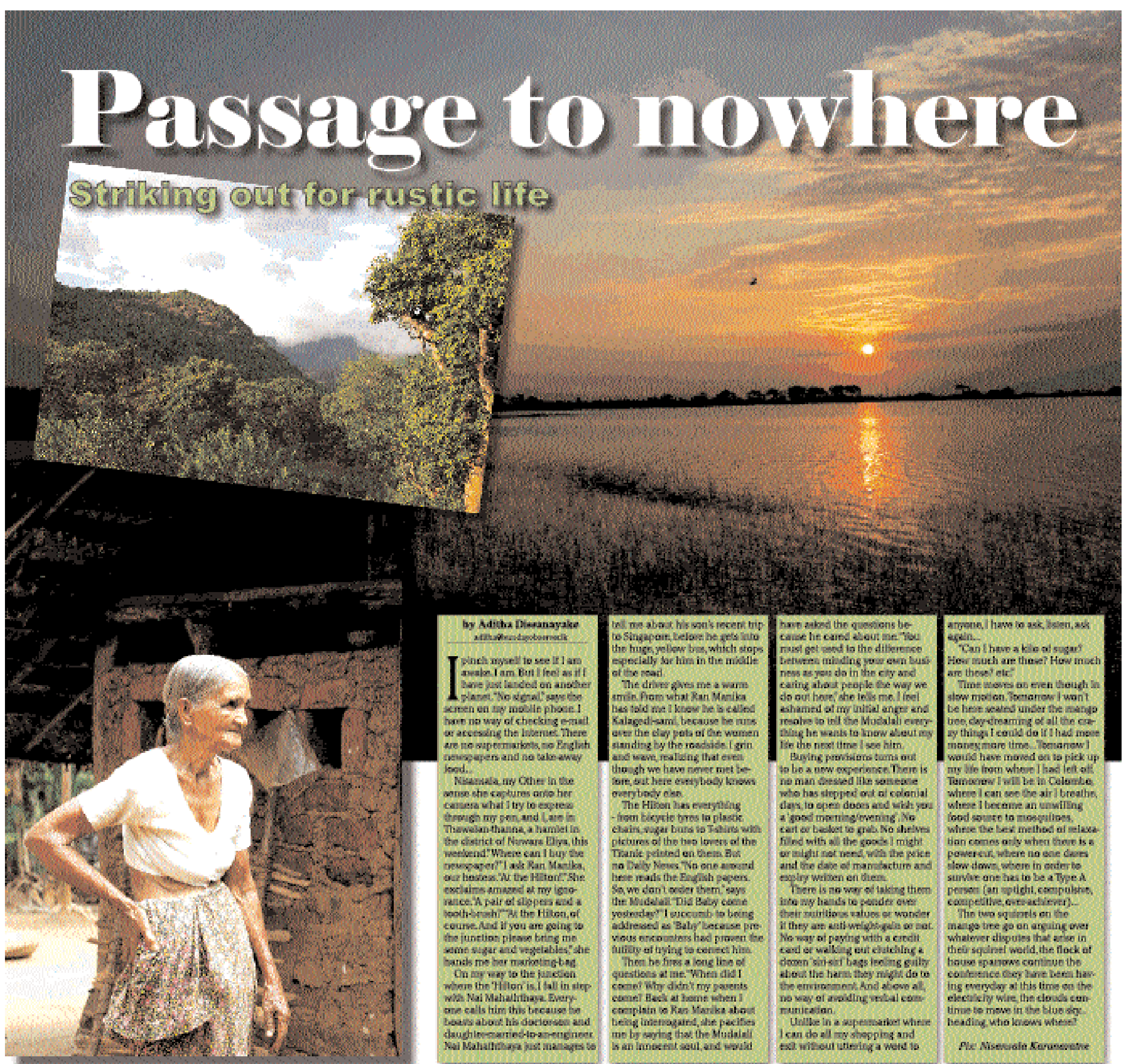


Passage to nowhere

Striking out for rustic life



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I pinch myself to see if I am awake. I am. But I feel as if I have just landed on another planet. "No signal," says the screen on my mobile phone. I have no way of checking e-mail or accessing the Internet. There are no supermarkets, no English newspapers and no take-away food...

Nanamala, my Other in the sense she captures onto her camera what I try to express through my pen, and Lani in Thawalan-thanna, a hamlet in the district of Nuwara Eliya, this weekend. "Where can I buy the newspaper?" I ask Ran Manika, our hostess. "At the Hilton." She exclaims amazed at my ignorance. "A pair of slippers and a tooth-brush!" At the Hilton, of course. And if you are going to the junction please bring me some sugar and vegetables," she hands me her marketing bag.

On my way to the junction where the Hilton is, I fall in step with Nai Mahalithaya. Everyone calls him this because he boasts about his doctorate and daughter married to an engineer. Nai Mahalithaya just manages to

tell me about his son's recent trip to Singapore, before he gets into the huge yellow bus, which stops especially for him in the middle of the road.

The driver gives me a warm smile. From what Ran Manika has told me I know he is called Kalagedi-sami, because he runs over the clay pots of the women standing by the roadside. I grin and wave, realising that even though we have never met before, out here everybody knows everybody else.

The Hilton has everything - from bicycle tyres to plastic chairs, sugar buns to T-shirts with pictures of the two lovers of the Triangle painted on them. But no Daily News. No one around here reads the English papers. So we don't order them," says the Mudalali. "Did Baby come yesterday?" I succumb to being addressed as "Baby" because previous encounters had proven the futility of trying to correct him.

Then he fires a long line of questions at me. "When did I come? Why didn't my parents come? Back at home when I complain to Ran Manika about being interrogated, she pacifies me by saying that the Mudalali is an innocent soul, and would

have asked the questions because he cared about me." You must get used to the difference between minding your own business as you do in the city and caring about people the way we do out here," she tells me. I feel ashamed of my initial anger and resolve to tell the Mudalali everything he wants to know about my life the next time I see him.

Buying provisions turns out to be a new experience. There is no man dressed like someone who has stepped out of colonial days, to open doors and wish you a good morning/evening. No cart or basket to grab. No shelves filled with all the goods I might or might not need, with the price and the date of manufacture and expiry written on them.

There is no way of taking them into my hands to ponder over their nutritious values or wonder if they are anti-weight-gain or not. No way of paying with a credit card or walking out clutching a dozen 'siri-siri' bags feeling guilty about the harm they might do to the environment. And above all, no way of avoiding verbal communication.

Unlike in a supermarket where I can do all my shopping and exit without uttering a word to

anyone, I have to ask, listen, ask again...

"Can I have a kilo of sugar? How much are those? How much are those?" etc.

Time moves on even though in slow motion. Tomorrow I won't be here seated under the mango tree, day-dreaming of all the crazy things I could do if I had more money, more time... Tomorrow I would have moved on to pick up my life from where I had left off. Tomorrow I will be in Colombo, where I can see the air I breathe, where I become an unwilling food source to mosquitoes, where the best method of relaxation comes only when there is a powercut, where no one dares slow down, where in order to survive one has to be a Type A person (an uptight, compulsive, competitive, overachiever)...

The two squirrels on the mango tree go on arguing over whatever disputes that arise in their squirrel world, the flock of house sparrows continue the conference they have been having everyday at this time on the electricity wire, the clouds continue to move in the blue sky, heading who knows where?

Pic: Nisewala Karunaratne



Sari splendour

The sari has oft been described as 'the apparel that covers all...yet reveals all'. What is it about this length of cloth wrapped around a woman's body that adds so much allure? Visitors from distant kingdoms and empires to the country since time immemorial have been tantalised by bewitching women clad in saris. Why? The answer is seen here in the fashions presented by Technique International at the SBC Suppliers Convention 2008 held at the Grand Hotel Nuwara Eliya.

Pic: Vipula Amerasinghe