

A Fishy Business

Posted on



The vibrant Peliyagoda Fish Market Complex

Trying to get sleep out of my eyes, I slowly moved forward. People bustled by me and I tried to avoid head on collisions with busy people who were so out of pace with my slow gait. Taking my first step inside the building, I stopped short, and I could feel my eyes widen in surprise. So much activity, people and of course a humongous quantity of fish!! We were at the Peliyagoda Fish Market Complex, where life begins when most of us are fast asleep.

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At the Peliyagoda Fish Market Complex, the day starts early – at two in the morning. Therefore, by the time I got to the market, at five in the morning, it was already in full swing with buyers and sellers rushing around. Hundreds of people milled towards the market on foot, trucks, bicycles, bikes, three-wheels, cars, jeeps and any way imaginable with two motives in hand – to buy or sell fish.

Equipped with a vast parking space for sellers and customers alike, many were still unloading their precious cargo into baskets and other containers to be carried inside. Feeling like an odd man out in this sea of bargainers, I took a tentative step inside the main auctioning building, trying to decide which way to head. 'Eh yo, Eh yo', a man shouted right behind me and startled, I quickly moved aside to see a man carrying an orange basket filled with fish rushing by. Even though I was initially stunned, as time passed by such incidences proved to be common occurrences as people scurried back and forth carrying fish in baskets or push carts.

Taking another step, I pulled back short as water was flung from a bucket, waking me up from my sluggish state. I realised if not for my quick reflexes, the splash would have soaked me from head to toe. Therefore, keeping a sharp lookout for such unexpected episodes, I continued to explore the Fish Market.

The floor inside the building was wet requiring all passers-by to be extra careful with their footing. Fish were sold at raised platforms, with walking aisles in between, where the salesmen have kept baskets or have laid the fish down on the platform to better display their products. Some have tried to be more creative by setting up tables to cut fish or to conduct their transactions. Every now and then, a supervisor would walk up and take count of the fish sold and move on, keenly observing the surrounding area.

Approaching one of these stalls, I eagerly looked about trying to identify some of the fish that were on sale. However, I was not able to get pass the different types and sizes of Tuna. Exasperated I looked up to see a seller curiously staring at me and I quickly took the opportunity of inquiring about the different types of fish sold at the stall. With a slight smile on his face, he eagerly pointed out the different types of fish saying 'that one is Sura Paraw. That is Lena Paraw and that's Korali'.

'Thava adu karanna puluvanda?' (Can you reduce the price a little more?), I heard the person next to me shout over the overwhelming drone to the seller. Even though the seller was reluctant to settle in for a lower price, after some time he gave in, and the happy customer continued on to his next stall with the bargained catch. All around me people haggled and shouted across trying to get the best bargain possible.

At one stall, I watched as a person continued to clean the scales of a fish with a curious looking tool – shaped like a brush it had a wooden handle and where the bristles would be, the tool had nails attached. When asked its purpose, I was told

that this tool is more secure for cleaning scales when compared with a knife as there is a better grip for the vigorous movements needed in the process. Then in another corner, I saw a person inserting a thin metal rod to the underside of the fins of Tuna. Each time he took it out and looked at the hollowed side of the rod, checking the colour of the contents, which indicated the freshness of the fish. By the entrances and at certain points throughout the complex people who sold polythene bags and such for packaging called onto the passers-by to come and get their purchases wrapped.

Outdoors there were more activity. A raised platform with a covering situated in one end housed more fish stalls, where sellers were busy cutting and chopping fish. A little further from this hustle, a line of bikes, bicycles and three-wheelers were selling smaller fish and were engaged in weighing and calling out to customers to buy their modest wares.

As I stood outside, watching all the activity surrounding me, I noticed people with grimy attire coming outside with buckets of water or going towards water pumps positioned along various pillars of one of the buildings and washing their faces, hands and feet. After sprucing themselves they donned on fresh suits of clothing, got into luxurious looking vehicles and drove off. Slightly surprised, I realised that the Fish Market Complex is a place for people from all walks of life as they hop into the premises to get the best bargains for fish.

So continued the vibrancy of the Fish Market undimmed with the time of day as the sun rose high up in the sky, shining brightly, while the stream of people continued to flow in showing no signs of stopping.

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