

A Pinch Of Salt

Posted on



The enthusiastic salt harvesters of Puttlam dotted endless stretches of shallow glistening waters

Stretches of shallow glistening waters speckled with white mounds of salt lay picturesquely before us. Women with colourful plastic tubs on their heads scurried along the muddy paths as sure and prompt as lines of ants; the men, ankle deep in the boggy earth with their long-sticked rakes harrowed the pink-brown waters to excavate and make more of the chalky mounds. The salterns of Puttalam stretched as far as the eye could discern, meeting the bright blue scantily-clouded afternoon skies at a far off horizon.

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We passed through the gates of the Puttalam salt pans walking along its bank lined with the numerous shelters made out of dried up coconut leaves. At this time of the afternoon men and women were busy at work raking the saltern for salt and bringing up sack loads of their produce that went into larger piles inside as well as outside the sheds. Eager to learn the process of making salt we stepped down into the muddy waters and mingled with the enthusiastic salt harvesters of Puttalam.

The warm waterlogged earth felt soft under our feet as we balanced our way through the narrow, slippery walkways that crisscrossed the vast endless saltern all the way up to the bank on the other side, beyond which lay the lagoon. The saltern was arranged into numerous evaporation pools divided by muddy borders on which we walked. The mud was a strange combination of bluish grey, and shimmered in the afternoon sun as we squelched our way across.

The ponds are first dug out and prepared with the mud that is formed in the wake of the rainy season. This process of arranging the salt pans according to the workers is called placing the 'thalama'. After the ponds are dried up in the sun for a few days the sea water - or in this case the lagoon water - is pumped out into these shallow pools through a network of shallow channels that connect each pond along which the water is carried through from one pond to the next. Maintaining a depth of six inches, the water in the ponds is evaporated in stages, keeping the salinity of each pond within a certain range. When the temperature is at 24 to 25 degrees Celcius the crystals of salt are formed beneath the water. As the salt crystals start forming, a white foamy border is seen along the edges of the ponds, lining the water.

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The water is evaporated over a period of about 35 to 45 days in the series of ponds, to the point where other salts precipitate out of the saturated brine, allowing the pure salts to be harvested. As the water thins and the salt forms, the colour of the water in the salt pans changes considerably. The often vibrant shades of pink are due to the microorganisms in the water such as the various types of algae that form due to the increased salinity of the water.

The workers bore the blazing heat as they continued tirelessly to gather the day's harvest before the seasonal monsoon rains break the skies, pouring heavily on the salterns and taking away their produce. The men with their 'katu lalla' a long-

sticked rake, broke the crystallised salt from the ponds and pulled out the salt with another tool they called the 'adina lalla'. The women filled their colourful tubs with the piles of salt that the men harvested, carrying them along, balancing the tubs on their heads over to the bank and into the sheds they call the 'keeps'.

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As we reached the lagoon the water shimmered; rugged winds blowing in from the sea created miniature waves that caused the water to slap incessantly at the rocks that held the bank we stood on. Far across the water was a grove of coconut trees standing strikingly dark and green against the blue of the water and that of the skies above. Looming out through the coconut palms were a line of large white wind turbines towering high into the heavens, their blades turning in tune to the ferocious sea breeze.

We turned back to cross the vast saltern once again, the wind shoving us from behind and making us lose our balance on the slippery mud-faced earth. Leaving the land of salt behind we brought with us the mental images of the men and women hard at work, and of the making of salt, the mineral that is one of the basic most of the human tastes.

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