

A Treat from Jaffna

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Bundles of odiyal at the Jaffna market ready for sale

Kotta Kilangu or odiyal is the most emblematic of foods to come out of Jaffna.

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In Delft we came across a family digging up a treasure. We stopped dead in our tracks. Who would have hoarded gold in ashy sand in this desolate beach? But then Delft was after all playground of the South Indian princelings – 600 years even before the Portuguese and then the Dutch annexed the island. So who can say what treasure sleeps under its layers? Delft, is after all, an island of wonders with short coral walls, towering palmyra palms and the crimson hued aloe vera. We nosed towards where the family was knee deep in sand. What we found in thick heaps on the overturned ground were tennis ball sized palmyra seeds. Our ‘gold’ turned out to be odiyal. I had not been way out of the mark in taking the satiny yellow brown to be gold. For the inhabitants of Jaffna, odiyal is as good as gold and as sweet as fruit from the heavens.

Also called Kotta Kilangu, the odiyal symbolises the spirit of arid Jaffna. They are the inevitable gift to take home from the North.



Before being dried, the odiyal glows with the fibrous golden beauty

In far-flung corners of the hot peninsula of Jaffna, it is an age-old custom to plant palmyra seeds to germinate. They will be planted in clusters and when the time is right, whole fields are upturned, for the tubers are extracted, and then the beautiful wood-like odiyal within heaped on to baskets. It should be boiled and then dried in the inner courtyard *meda midula* of homes or gardens under the sizzling Jaffna sun, and will be ready to be sold or eaten. Split into two, the odiyal as we imagine it, has the same, quite charming appearance of a strip of sweet sugarcane.

The palmyra seed that does not sprout conceals a secret delight too. When the hard husk is split jelly-like embryos are revealed within; they are a refreshing bite. An exotic flavour that reminds you of coconut, yet not quite the same. The seeds,

which have sprouted the gleaming amber odiyal are used for fertiliser or cattle fodder, while the odiyal itself makes its way to mainland Jaffna.



Seeds with no sprout yield a milky sweet kernel

In the narrow, bustling byways of the colourful and pungent Jaffna market, you keep bumping on to sacksful of the tender, fresh yellow-white sticks. They form the façade of dark, cavernous shops heaped with Nelli cordial, *pannatu* and some other wonders endemic to the peninsula. Odiyal is usually eaten dry, a snack one can chew on for hours on end. Thus, in the market you can also find odiyal in the form of tiny biscuit like chips, resembling fat, lazy, curled up, cute letter 'C's in shape. The odiyal can also be boiled and simply eaten, sometimes with a pinch of turmeric and salt, where it would become a tender, juicy snack.

This fibrous eatable also changes form and can also be bought as flour in the market. This flour will in turn nourish hearty Jaffna staples such as the Odiyal Kool and the Odiyal Pittu and also finds its way into palm posha.

Odiyal is the very character of this arid land crystallised. The bud of the king

palmyra, it is born in the recesses of the heated but fertile soil. Though tough and dry, it contains its own unique individual taste, with a charming, sweet core.

