A Wonderful Experience in Pettah

Posted on

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During the week of Thai Pongal, the streets of Pettah are filled with greenery and colorful flowers. It was a rather contrasting sight to what onlookers are usually accustomed to. Strolling along, we stopped by makeshift-stalls and carts to explore the unique decorations for the ‘festival of harvest’.



The streets are filled with make-shift stalls selling Thoranam (tender coconut leaves) as decoratives.

Pettah is an endless hustle and bustle of businessman, retailers merchants, street hawkers and shoppers flowing from every street. Despite the busy spectrum of events, Pettah is a market place of culture. As Sri Lanka is a country filled with

ethnic diversity, it was fascinating to discover the landscape of the streets change to accommodate the needs of people who prepare for any festive season. Following Christmas, January celebrates Thai Pongal. Celebrated by Hindus, the festival is held to show appreciation to the Sun God for providing a bountiful harvest. Families prepare pongal (sweet rice) to offer deities as thanksgiving.

Rows and rows of makeshift stalls occupied the Sea Street, displaying various decorations for Thai Pongal. Navigating our way through a sea of shoppers, we spoke to vendors to understand the significances of these festive decorations.

Thai Pongal is thanksgiving of crop and thus various leaves and plants are used to decorate places of worship, homes and shops. Fresh turmeric plants, plantain leaves and mango leaves are mainly used as decorations for the harvest festival.

Thoranam known as ‘hanging decorations’ were made using tender coconut leaves. The thoranam was folded neatly in a bird-like shape. The turmeric plants, are generally tied around the pongal pots.



Mango leaves in odd numbers are placed on the mouth of the Kumbam.



Firecrackers to celebrate the festive occasion.



Sugarcane is one the main crops, which is offered to the Sun God.



Colorful garlands are used to adorn idols and homes.

Sugarcane being one of the main harvest crops is offered to the Sun God. Sugarcane is sourced from several areas such as Ratnapura, Embilipitiya, Kahawatte, Kurunegala, Elakanda, Moneragala, Weerakatiya, Welawaya and Buttala. As we walked further, a sweet fragrance of flowers drew our attention. Vibrant garlands make attractive home decors while also used to adorn idols. Vendors were also selling firewood, clay pots, fireworks, fruits, and Polpala (Aerva Lanata).

Usually the vendors reserve a place to set up stalls two nights before the festival. They make sure that all goods are sold a day before pongal. More than a 100 vendors, come from various parts of the country and arrange their carts and wooden planks to display their goods. For most of them, its a family business as they have been involved in this festive trade for several years. In our conversations, we learnt that they are from different religious backgrounds thus, this festival signifies unity among the diverse communities of the country. As we left Pettah, we reflected on the significance of Thai Pongal. Pettah, surely brings together people from various ethnicities to help celebrate festive occasions in Sri Lanka.

Rows and rows of makeshift stalls occupied the Sea Street, displaying various decorations for Thai Pongal.



Pongal is prepared in clay pots to offer deities as thanksgiving.



Fresh turmeric plants are used to tie around the pongal pots.



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Thaipongal traditions

Hindu households follow many traditions to celebrate Thai Pongal.

The festive treats include: *pongal*, crunchy *murruku*, *vadai*, *ala bonda*, delicious *kesari* and various types of sweets. *Kumbam* and lamps are present in all Hindu rituals. A brass or silver pot is filled with clean water. Usually mango leaves in odd numbers (three or five) are kept on the mouth of the pot and a cleaned coconut is placed on top. The pot is a representation of Mother Earth, water symbolizes the essence that gives life to all, the green leaves is life and the coconut signifies the divine consciousness of God. Another highlight is the *kolam* or *rangoli*, design patterns adorning the entrances of homes and temples.