Bargain alley down fabric valley PAMUNUWA

Posted on

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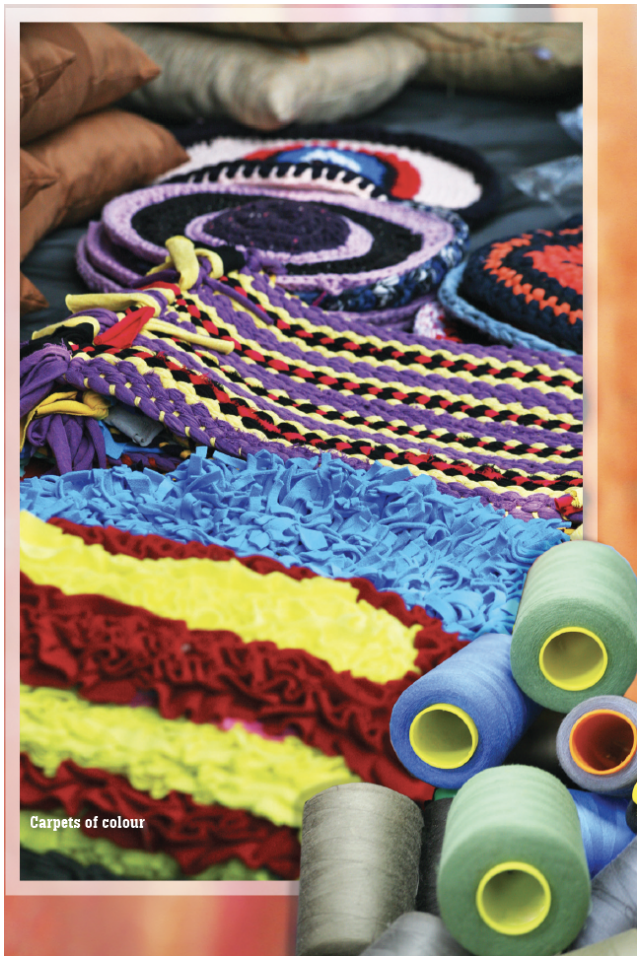
Awakened by the morning sun, sheet after sheet of assorted fabric raised their colours into a restless sea of gleam, illuminating the already garnished sidewalks of Pamunuwa's open, textile boutiques. Bargain buyers, both individual and wholesale, follow the striking, telltale route that sees the near spill of generous garments and their accessories, over onto the pavements of the long anticipated alleyway.

The Pamunuwa textile market in Maharagama, in the mid 1980s', marked the rise of some of the first fabric stalls, appearing mainly, for the sale of *pahanthira* or cloth

oil lamp wicks and bed linens. With nearly three decades behind of what seemed like a mere shift of perception, created space for these fruitful little shops of bargain haven, which stretches the height of any customer’s eager excitement. Fabric materials, upholstery and decorative accessories for clothes, handbags, soft toys, curtains, carpets, furniture, but to name a few, and even the ready-made items themselves, were all amongst the treasures one would find along this inexpensive yet versatile alley of sorts. As we slowly trailed along the edge of the pavements we were at the mercy of the rush of people who seemed familiar with the way of the bargain ballet. They appeared to know where to find what and the who’s who of the vendor world. The vendors grin delightfully as they peer into the streets and greet potential customers with an overwhelming throw of various clothing and material. A thousand selections displayed at a glance, is sure to be noticed in eyes that reflect the enticing colours, and move abruptly to the relevant clothing stalls like a moth to a flame. Even if it meant dodging tooting motorists and wrestling over fellow shoppers, to get the best for less. With a fresh bunch of lace and ribbons trickling over his careful arms, he called for help, “come hang these up,” he said, in Sinhalese, “don’t keep these good people waiting.” And we had been waiting… forever it seemed, in a queue that never actually queued. A young boy, the vendor’s son, assisted his father in setting up the shop while displaying to us, the tender fanciness of the ribbons and lace. As much as we tried to slither through the hustle and bustle of people taking up space at the ribbon shop while trying to avoid being in the way of a multitude of traffic, all at the same time. We couldn’t help but notice the balls of thread parading the opposite side-walk. Swirled around short plastic tubes, each ball of thread, an extract of unity, radiated the adoring colours of the rainbow. A rainbow at this point, after a cool shower of rain was the revival we needed, considering our bargain battles at the ribbon shop.



Boxes of zippers



With hopes for more sprouting impressions and flurry, we moved on, and saw the succeeding stalls to be as promising as the ones we left behind. Sequins, in small plastic packages glistened like diamonds in a pageant, the rolling tubes of bright fabric material unveiled like open books, towels as clean and fresh as lemons hung from fasteners attached to the low, hanging ceilings of the little shops. Tambourines and symbols could be heard further ahead of us and as Lankawe cupped our hands downward over our sweat-stained foreheads and sun-strained eyes, to make sense of what we were hearing, there they were; charming, miniature wind-up toys. They attracted curious children, who competed with each other to find a spot to happily squat and watch the toys come to life with their noisy instrumental music, while parents busily shopped.

Soon, our tiny entertainers were being packed back into their respective boxes, and the late afternoon sun, also, seemed to be retreating into the back streets of Pamunuwa, and we could feel our leg muscles doing the same. Turning to observe the distance we had covered, down through the alley, our eyes were met with a wave of blended colours as far as we could see. We couldn’t fathom perspective as it too, we realised, had strayed into the heart of Pamunuwa’s intriguing open market. Even the long cuts of hung up fabric material drifted back and forth, inviting an extension to our visit.