



Rathnasami is busy extracting copper coils

Our lazy Sunday afternoons were pleasantly disturbed by an echoing cry of a man; “bothal paththara, bothal paththara”. He was one of the most anticipated visitors of many households. Today, the collector of old newspapers and bottles is rarely seen and will soon become a distant memory.

Words Kulanthi Silva | **Photographs** Dilshi Thathsarani and Anuradha Perera

He dawdles along the lane carrying a bundle of newspapers on his head and the loud jangle coming from the gunnysack he was carrying was almost similar to a snooze alarm. The one-of-a-kind metal scale he used to bring along to measure the weight of the papers had a mind of its own; we could not care less of this trick.

We, Sri Lankans wake up to a cup of tea and the daily newspaper. Reading has always been serious business for us. We would read one or more papers a day leaving them all to be stacked away in the backyard. We were assured that this stack of papers and used glass bottles would not reach impressive heights. Our friendly weekly visitor would take them all away at an incentive. All the newspapers, the bottle paper man bought were sold to grocery shops to wrap all kinds of goods. Used books would be given to street vendors to make ‘kadala gottas’ to wrap roasted grams, pickle and all sorts of Sri Lankan munchies.

It is said that the Nadars originally introduced this profession to Sri Lanka. The Nadars emigrated in large numbers from Thoothukudi, Tamil Nadu to Sri Lanka and many other countries looking for lucrative opportunities in the 19th Century. People from this community are known for their dynamism. They would start something on a small scale with a small capital and develop it in to great heights. Nadars introduced the business of collecting recyclable material such as paper, glass, cardboard and all sort of metals including scrap iron to be sold to grocery shops, street vendors and recycling services. The business flourished to an extent where each generation of this profession could start their own business and employ more and more people to do the job of the bottle paper man for them. They have lived through many cultural movements and social phenomena.

About two decades ago, this thriving trade attracted many other Sri Lankans to the business. The bottle paper man opened his own shop, the bottle paper shop. The bottle paper shop was simply a yard where they had the recyclable waste collected stored. A medium-scale operation would employ about ten bottle paper men to stroll along

allocated neighbourhoods to collect all sorts of recyclables. The bottle paper man was given an allowance of few thousands allowing him to keep a mark up of five rupees per kilogram. Eventually they approached hotels in the cities to collect the refuse. The business was good.

Today, the bottle paper shop has further evolved and the operation is diversified. Most of the shops do not employ bottle paper men to collect recyclables; instead, people have direct access to their yards where they stock and sort their goods. Waste paper was initially sent to Valaichchenai Recycled Paper Mill. The process of waste paper recycling requires certain quantity levels of paper to successfully complete the process in order to generate products of interest for consumer use. The collection of paper could not meet the required quantity levels of paper to be processed by the mill mechanism and the facility was compelled to close down. At present, all collected paper and plastic are mostly sold to recycling services or exported to India. Glass items are sent to a facility in Horana. The interesting thing about glass is that, it can be recycled as many times as required without having its quality debased. Cardboard is locally recycled and exported too. Recycling of scrap iron is said to be the most profitable. A good 60,000 rupees was paid per ton and the current market price is running at thirty-five-thousand rupees per ton due to market conditions. With many competitors playing their cards, each of these operations have found their own distinct style to stay competitive in the field. Competition is so strong that in most cases bidding is required to get tenders for work. Every passing minute is valued in rupees. These operators have to bid and the highest quoted bid will be granted the tender to buy the waste materials from certain manufacturing plants in the country.

There are not many Nadars in Sri Lanka today. These born merchants have mastery over what they started. Few of these pioneers of the industry pull the strings having launched their own recycling facilities. They have set a benchmark to the hungry newcomers.

It is magic to see the world evolving before your eyes. Everyone is challenged to come out of the comfort zone to start walking at the same pace as everything else is.

Recycling has a new face today; the industry has become bigger than the original bottle paper man's primitive dream. There is no room in the industry for small-scale players. The industry is now a far-reaching and multifaceted platform that shades and feed many in need. As a result, this iconic character who was regularly spotted walking our streets is debunked by the very own idea he nurtured and only dwell in the pages of a book; but behind every character written, there is a real person who has given life. Bottle paper man had been one of the first environmentalists in the country. He was certainly a serendipitous occurrence to brighten up our day.

“Bothal Paththara, Bothal Paththara”

