

Enna Apen Ganna



We walked amongst the colossal carrots, earthy potatoes, rows and rows of freshly-picked chillies, shiny tomatoes and countless other locally grown veggies neatly stocked and sitting side by side with the spices, fruits, sweets, clothing, bags and a myriad of other useful paraphernalia. The Badalgama and Minuwangoda Divi Neguma fairs in Gampaha were brimming with activity that particular Sunday morning as we slowly mingled with the local folk in search of fresh pickings...

Words Kamalika Jayathilaka Photographs Indika De Silva

The scattered grey clouds that came together in a plain sunless sky marked the beginning of another end of a long week. And as the rest of the country enjoyed a lazy morning lie-in warranted by the gloomy and uncharacteristically cold weather, a set of eager individuals scampered about their chores carrying sacks full of supplies to and from loaded trucks and tuk-tuks and into piles of produce that made the Sunday Fair.

A visit to the Sunday fair is a must-do element in the weekly schedule of most Sri Lankans where they pick out among others, the week's fresh veggies and fruits that go into their daily meals.

As we crossed the threshold of the newly refurbished Badalgama Fair we were instantly engulfed in the flurry of buying, selling, haggling, and of course the incessant laughter and animation within the bustling market. A solitary Pani Dodam (sweet orange) juice vendor was squeezing the juice out of fresh green Sri Lankan oranges giving us a toothy smile and motioning us to try his range of fruit drinks in luminescent shades. As thirsty shoppers weary from their weekly marketing approached him in haste we slowly edged away further into the centre of the Fair.

Right next to him was an eye catching spread of sweets and goodies ranging from the familiar Kiri Toffee (milk toffees) to Puhul Dosi, Weli Thalapa and Seeni Murukku among countless other confectionery, behind which sat an eager youth beckoning the passers-by especially the little ones entailing their parents to try out their exceptional taste.

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A visit to the Sunday Fair is a must-do element in the weekly schedule of most Sri Lankans, where they pick out among others, the week's fresh veggies and fruits that go into their daily meals. Satisfied with the quality of the beetroots or the ladies fingers after turning them again and again in their hands under close scrutiny, they unfolded their cloth bags into which the vendors poured a variety of fresh produce, bananas, greens, onions and chillies that they cheerfully took home for a very good bargain.

As we progressed into the heart of the Sathi Pola (weekly fair) we were caught up

in the amazing variety of produce that were made available. We passed a whole section of dry fish stalls where all the vendors sold divergent types of dried fish large and small brought down from the coastal belt that encircled the Island. Others sold betel, arecanut and dried up tobacco leaves. Then there were the fish mongers and the butchers, those selling soap, books, hats, light bulbs, batteries, spoons, plastic basins and every other minute essentials within a household under a single expansive roof.

The Sunday Fairs that have been in existence for decades fulfill another significant service of providing a market place for the village level farmers, growers of vegetables and small entrepreneurs. In an effort to encourage village level subsistence, the 'Divi Neguma' Programme by the Ministry of Economic Development has revamped so many fairs around the Gampaha district with proper space and shelter adding convenience not only to the vendors but also to the shoppers. Stepping out of the Badalgama Fair, we learned about a similar yet much larger one in Minuwangoda and decided to explore that too before heading back home.

The Minuwangoda Fair was situated in the midst of the small township in a large plot of land. Double the size of the Badalgama Fair, this contained more vegetable and other vendors. Throngs of shoppers rushed in and out, and the fair was a ceaseless sea of people moving about creating an intense roar of voices. The vendors stood on their unsteady stools and chairs, old fashioned weighing scales in hand, shouting out their prices at their customers. The fruit-sellers selling everything from the common bananas to palm fruits boasted out loud the freshness of their goods. "Laabai laabai... Kesel laabai, Papol laabai...", (Cheap cheap, cheap bananas, cheap papaw) "Enna Apen Ganna" (come buy from us) they yelled in a sing-song manner at the top of their voices competing for the attention of the passers-by.

Two young ladies sat almost hidden among a vast array of red brown clay pots large and small along with various other products made out of clay. An elderly lady sat with a bucket of fresh cashew nuts, talking with the vendor who sat across from her exchanging a few words about the weather.

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The customers who had come from all across the Gampaha district passed from one vendor to the next examining their goods, engaged in cheerful banter. In between, they treated themselves to hot and spicy Vadai an appetising Pol Roti or a bag of peanuts which they washed down with a refreshing home-made fruit drink to energise themselves for the rest of their marketing session.

As evening fast approached and we got back on the road, a morning spent gaily among the village folk who came together to buy and sell, throngs of complacent shoppers hands laden with fresh purchases one by one crowded into tuk-tuks, buses and onto bikes, sacks, bags and all, rushing home in fervent anticipation of spending the rest of their Sunday at leisure.

Badalgama Fair - From Ja-Ela take the Minuwangoda Road (it is off the Minuwangoda Divulapitiya Road).

Minuwangoda Fair - Take the Minuwangoda Road from Ja Ela. This is located in the Minuwangoda Town.

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