Jaffna Market: a Bargain for Experiences

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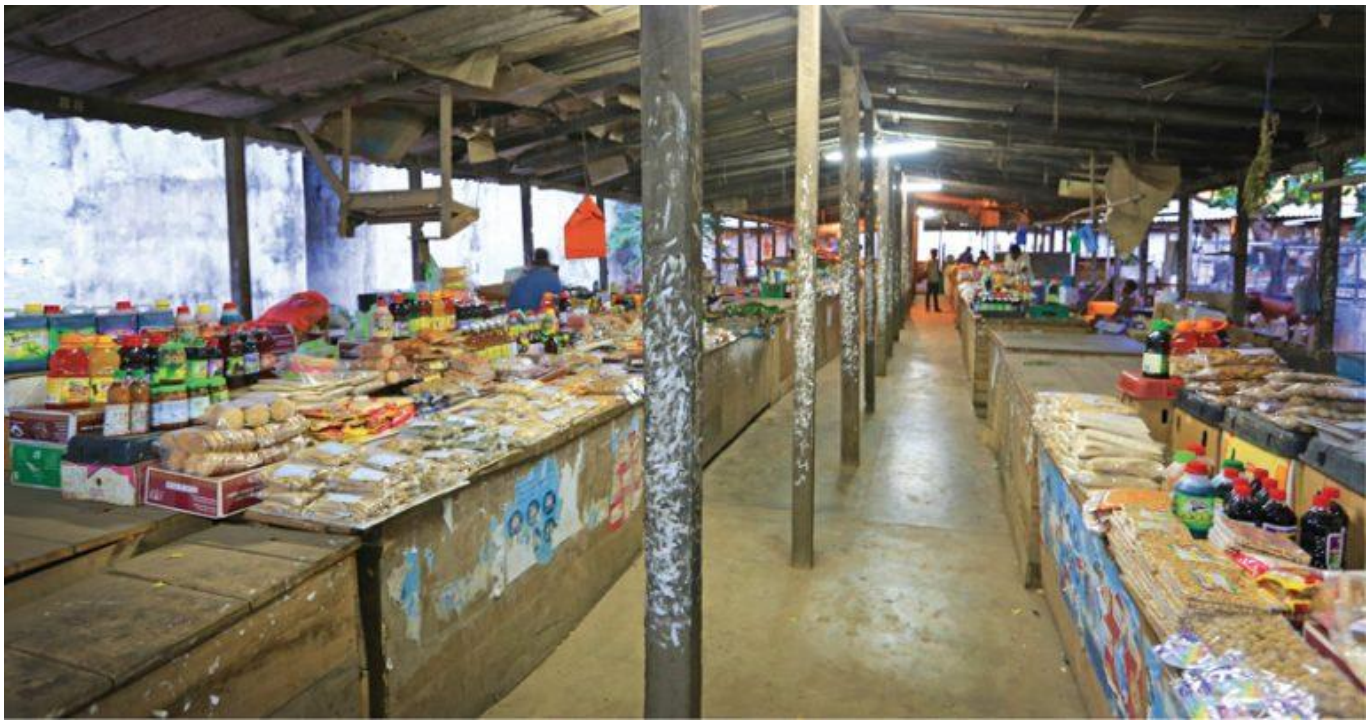

The interior view of the open air structure of the market

Jaffna Market has no shortage of spectacular sights. Located right in the heart of the town, this prominent yellow tinged block is most popular for selling fresh produce, exotic spices and local confections. It is also a veritable treasure trove where with every turn something wondrous lurks ready to be explored.

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The evening sights and sounds at
Jaffna market

They say to truly know a town all one really needs to do is walk its streets. If this is true then Jaffna can be described in one word. Bustling. The junction between Hospital road and Stanley road where Jaffna market begins is a hive of activity watched over by the great poet Avaiyaar whose statue graces Stanley road with it’s silent yet dignified presence. Even at the crack of dawn, the streets were filled with people all walking at varying speeds through the astounding maze of paths that make up the cultural and commercial hub of Jaffna. Bicycles and scooters (a common sight in Jaffna) were also moving into the streets all the while being accompanied by an orchestra of busses tooting their horns at anything that dared to move.

The inside of Jaffna market had just the same amount of chaos but was perforated with the delight and excitement of many intriguing products to explore. Power House road (which ran directly adjacent to Stanley road) exhibited tantalizing goods. Things like vibrant coloured textiles, Salwars and sarees draped on mannequins as well as gold jewellery intricately designed in the South Indian style, often drew adoring groups of women to its vicinity.

Yet other riches could be found at this exotic Northern Bazaar, some even more precious than gold. The area where Jaffna market’s fruit and vegetable is sold is made up of a number of open-air pavilions where smiling vendors wait to show off their goods. Jaffna’s soil is dry and particularly fertile for fruits and vegetables of all kinds to be cultivated all year long, as such rows upon rows of plump country vegetables lay stacked on the floor, gleaming with freshness and as large as I had ever seen.

There was a colourful spread of capsicums, onions and beans, fat purple brinjal, great halves of dewy pumpkin and tomatoes as big as a clenched fist, all placed neatly for customers to choose from. We watched as quantities were measured using only a pair of scales held together with a chain before being packaged in large banana leaves for protection. Fruits were treated in the same manner as the vegetables and were just as readily available.

Most noticeable were the giant sized Jack fruit and the bright orangey yellow *Karthacolomban*, a variety of mangos native to Jaffna. Rich in vitamin C, these mangoes are high in water content and had a smooth honeyed taste that made it both refreshing and delicious. All produce seen at Jaffna market were picked that day itself and transported by lorry to the vendors. Most of it, we were told, would be gone by the time the market closed at six in the evening.

> Jaffna Market proved to be rewarding as it provided a glimpse into life in one of Sri Lanka’s most iconic towns.

There were other products however that would always be accessible. Spices for instance, peppered the market and the distinct scent of *Mor Milagai* seemed woven in to the air. These sun-dried chilies that had been soaked in buttermilk, gave of the sharpest of aromas and looked pale and distinct sitting in large sacks around almost every stall we passed. Jaffna as you might have guessed is also where Jaffna curry powder originates, a rich and earthy blend of fennel, turmeric, coriander, cumin, fenugreek and cinnamon, roasted and ground up to perfectly compliment a meal of fish, of which the northern peninsula was in no short supply.

Packets of curry powder already lay prepackaged along side bottles of Rosetto, a tawny coloured ‘wine’ that resembled sweet grape juice mixed with cinnamon and cloves. Nelli crush, a popular bright green cordial made from local gooseberries could also be found close by. Both these products having been produced locally by the Rosarian sisters, a monastery of nuns who have been residing in Jaffna for years. Other local treats can also be found including sugary delights like peanut biscuits, popcorn clusters coated in pink sugar and of course one cannot forget *thal* jaggery made from the sap of the ever versatile palmyrah and packaged in tiny delicate baskets made from woven palmyrah leaves call *kuddan*.



Delicious and famous Karthacolomban mangoes are out on display

Products made from palmyrah were very well represented. It was astonishing to see how many ways this humble palm leaf could be used with no part of it being spared. Edible products like the tough snack *odiyal* are made using the palmyrah tubers. Its fibres are used to make carpets and its tender leaves make the perfect base for weaving preparations that produce hats, bags and toys. With such flexibility, is it no wonder that this valuable plant is referred to as “the heavenly palm”.

Towards the end of our visit, the exuberance of Jaffna market could still not be underestimated. Even as the sun began to set and street lamps turned on, people lingered, mingling between the stalls, laughing and talking with each other as the night went on.

This proved to be an excellent metaphor for the over all spirit of the town of Jaffna, which simply buzzed with excitement and life. The immersion into such a unique cultural experience proved to be extremely rewarding as it provided a valuable glimpse into the daily life of one of Sri Lanka’s most iconic towns.