Narrow Streets of Spices

Posted on

The quadrangle with Keyzer Street where spices are laden into lorries for islandwide distribution

Behind the busy main street of Olcott Mawatha in Pettah, Colombo 11, where the main Fort Railway station is situated, an even busier place is tucked away in its backyard. This is where the action is. Those who make it their daily business to habituate its narrow environ are street smart, spice wise and food shrewd.

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Photographs Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Hot red chillies to tingle your taste buds

It’s the secret world of Pettah where the nation’s spice and food merchants hold daily court and preside over the daily price of food. Down these narrow streets of spices and other food items there are just lines of non descript ground level buildings most of them painted in beige, and nearly all of them full with bags and bags of foodstuff.

For within this approximately quarter square mile of Pettah, between Second, Third, Fourth and Fifth Cross Street, lies Sri Lanka’s bustling food market hub. It is here, within this quadrangle that encompasses Keyzer Street, Prince Street, Old Moor Street and Dam Street that the daily market price of food items are determined. And it’s decided solely on market forces. And changes hour by hour.

It’s a perfect example of capitalism at its best. Where both the wholesale seller and the wholesale buyer have full information, not only of the world market prices but even of delays at port which could dramatically change the prices of these perishable commodities, all at their fingertips. Many sellers and buyers compete vigorously to sell and buy at the best possible price.

As you turn from the jam packed, slow moving, sedate traffic found on Olcott Mawatha to Second Cross Street, you will find yourself entering a world of its own. On this narrow street and in the network of other similarly narrow streets you can see its hustle and bustle, you can hear its din. Its nonstop action at a fast pace, like a movie clip being fast forwarded.

Down these narrow alleys, large lorries compete with small cart wagons laden with food items and men carrying foodstuffs, to maneuver its way to the wholesale dealer’s shop door. The tiny strip of the sidewalk is crammed with other pedestrians, all in a mad rush to go about their business. However behind the façade of confusion, and beneath the cacophonic din, there exists a highly organised network of traders.

Certain shops, especially down Old Moor Street, specialise in spices. They deal in bulk. Cardamoms from all the way Deraniyagala, cloves from Matara, cinnamon from Matale, nutmeg from Gampaha, coriander leaves, cumin, fennel, black pepper,

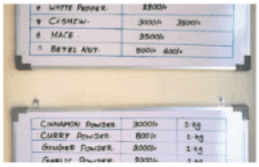
fenugreek seeds, mustard seeds, tamarind and all the other spices that Sri Lanka produces meet at Old Moor Street in Pettah. Including the ones imported. All are displayed in small silver bowls on the desks of the street's spice merchants – to be sold retail or bought wholesale to be distributed island wide.

Kitchen essentials – (from top left) mustard, fennel, cumin, tumeric, white pepper, black pepper, corinader and fenugreek

But there is more to life in this hectic food market in Pettah than a variety of spice. It is a mainstay to cater to the demands of the nation's staple diet. A great majority of Sri Lanka's food requirements are imported. And it's these traders down these streets who do the needful to ensure the larder is stuffed and does not run bare.

These essential items include chickpeas, dhal and all the pulses, grams, sugar, potatoes, chillies and onions. Though most are in constant demand like pulses, a few have a seasonal demand only. For instance, dates during the Ramadan period.

Take a walk along these streets to experience the wonderful spices, condiments and other food items that make the vibrant island cuisine.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