Nattamis

Posted on

Glimpses of the day’s workload

The air was infused with the smell of onions, carrots, pepper, rice, fruit and dried fish. A fleet of lorries laden with countless goods was parked in picturesque disarray. Rows of ‘pull carts’ in various corners bore an air of expectancy. The sun played a frolicsome game of light and shadows with the puddles along the streets.The sundry sound of human chatter, crows and engines set the tone for another day’s flurry of activities in the Pettah market. A conspicuous figure amidst this hustle & bustle was a ‘Nattami’ carrying a sack full of potatoes towards a shop.

Words Chamindra Warusawitharane Photographs Indika De Silva

Harold starts his day around four in the morning. He either gets a lift from one of

the big trucks transporting goods from Colombo Port to Pettah or commutes from home. Once he is in Pettah, Harold blends in to the everyday hustle & bustle of the market. His main task is shouldering sacks full of rice, vegetables, dried fish and such from lorries to wholesale shops, stalls and other lorries. Armed with a steel hook with a wooden handle, plenty of gumption and good humour he sets about his work as a 'Nattami'.

As Harold explained to us, a Nattami's work is based on trust. Most wholesale shop owners and Nattamis have known each other for years and have cordial relations. When a novice starts work as a Nattami he has to commence by simply unloading merchandise from lorries on to the backs of others. He will only be trusted with carrying goods once he truly becomes part of the network.

When we first spoke to Harold he was sitting on a pull cart, hook in hand waiting for work. Soon he and two others were busy carrying sacks of potatoes from a lorry to a nearby wholesale shop. Years of practice had taught Harold and his companions the value of economy of movement. They would go near the lorry pull sacks filled with potatoes towards them with the hook in one sweep and up goes the sacks on to their backs. Their swift feet carry them towards the shop at a quick rhythmic pace. If any passersby happen to be in the way of a Nattami carrying a heavy load, he would shout out a warning to avoid a pile-up.

While some carry one load at a time on their backs, others load pull carts full of several sacks or boxes (the number generally varies from four to 14) and pull the cart towards its destination. Many types of merchandise go into wholesale shops where they will be stored till it is time for distribution. However, some of the goods are sold on the same day at the nearby daily market.

Anthony, who had worked as a Nattami for 25 long years still comes to the market to watch the ongoing activities and talk to his friends.

The life of a Nattami revolves around a network of workers and business owners at the Pettah market. Harold introduced us to several women whose job is to sort out onions, potatoes and such into two batches: good ones and bad ones. The women come to the market a little after the Nattami to begin their work in the wholesale shops.

Members of this working network at the Pettah market sometimes retain long-term bonds. Anthony, who had worked as a Nattami for 25 long years still comes to the

market to watch the ongoing activities and talk to his friends. He is close to 80 years old and the merchants who knew him during his working years still help him with his financial affairs.

As the morning wore off the hectic atmosphere at the market gained pace. The engines buzzed, vendors at the daily market stood behind neat piles of their wares. Shoppers started to pour into the market looking for a good bargain. Tea and herbal drink sellers started picking up business. Amidst all these, Nattamis darted back and forth carrying gunnysacks and boxes to and from lorries: vital figures in the busy network of the Pettah market.

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