

Pettah: Paradise Bazaar in Colombo

Posted on

S. Wijeratne



The Pettah is a hive of activity. Pavement hawkers shouting out their wares at the top of their voices. Shopkeepers wooing passers-by to step in to their showrooms and make their pick. A carter urging his bullock along in the blare of angry horns from a long line of motor vehicles he has successfully managed to hold up. A young boy offering a fortune if you just buy a lottery ticket and scratch it for luck. Another young boy selling tea to the tired hawkers and coolies. Make way, make way a swarthy man, his muscles rippling and body gleaming with sweat, zig-zags through the teeming mass of people, with a heavy load on his back.

This is typical of the scene of the Pettah, Sri Lanka's main shopping bazaar. Centrally situated in Colombo, a little outside the staid Fort shopping area, the jostling crowds, cacophony of voices, and incessant tooting of horns in the hot humidity of the tropical sun are all part and parcel of this great bazaar. Pettah is a bazaar shoppers' paradise. Although luxurious highrise shopping arcades have sprouted throughout the city, Pettah will remain the main attraction for shoppers. There is nothing that you don't find in the Pettah: jewellery, clothes, crockery and cutlery, stationery, herbs and medicines, hardware, furniture and foodstuffs. The

general belief is that in the Pettah the goods are considerably cheaper. Not necessarily so, but it is a place where bargaining is not frowned upon. The Pettah has a history dating back to the period of Dutch rule in Sri Lanka from 1656-1796 AD. At the time the Pettah was where the elite lived.

The book "Twentieth Century Impressions of Ceylon", which describes the Pettah in those early days, says the name has been derived from "Pettai" in the Tamil language, which means extramural or outside the walls of the Fort. According to the book it had formerly been also known as the Black Town, mostly because of the population of native Lankans and Kaffir slaves.

Since the days of the Dutch occupation, most of the Pettah has been entirely rebuilt. The belfry at Kaymans Gate, the Dutch period museum at Prince Street and the Town Hall, presently housing the municipal office, remain to tell the tale of the Hollander.

The municipal office has many tales to its past. One is that it served as the Town Hall during the Dutch reign. The other is that it was the Courthouse of the Dutch. Those found guilty are said to have been taken to task at the spot where the belfry stands today, which is at the end of Fourth Cross Street.

But the accepted theory is that the belfry is situated in a place that was earlier known as Kaymans Gate. Kayman in Dutch means alligator. At the time, the area extending from Fourth Cross Street is said to have been a lake which abounded with alligators. This had been a means of protection for the Dutch governors who had their residences built in the middle of the lake. Anybody wishing to reach the residence had to do so via Kaymans Gate at the edge of the lake.

The Dutch period museum, although renovated, still holds onto its old world grandeur. It stands tall and majestic with its imposing frontal pillars, dwarfing the latter-day structures surrounding it and looking quite out of place. An iron gate running along its frontier keeps trespassers at bay. Anyone wishing to be transported to the Dutch era can do so by paying a nominal entrance fee.

Today the Pettah is a maze of streets, each boasting its own speciality. The streets are narrow and cobbled. But in most places the tread of feet and wheels have taken their toll and the cobblestones have worn away. On either side of the streets are rows and rows of shops selling their numerous wares.

Firstly there is Front Street, opposite the Fort Railway Station. Walking down Front Street, I realized its strength lay in clocks and wristwatches as the showcases indicated. Coming second were bags: travelling bags, kit bags, handbags and haversacks of different shapes and sizes and myriad colours. You take a right turn and full onto Maliban Street, where the stock in trade is stationery.

Running parallel with Front Street is First Cross Street dealing in electrical appliances. The array was astounding: from plug points and switches, colourful lampshades, and stands to every conceivable electrical appliance which will make a housewife's or handyman's dream come true.

If it is clothes you are looking for, Second Cross Street is the place. They sell ready-made garments, dress lengths and suit materials, both local and imported of varying texture. The attraction here are the Sri Lankan and Indian batik sarongs coming in a riot of colours. Some of them are ready to wear, others have to be cut and sewn. But it is no problem. The tailor in the nearest shop will do it for you for a few rupees.

I next got into Third Cross Street where the shops are filled with hardware. From nails to dog collars, anything can be found here. This street is also a homemaker's haven as most of the household fittings are available here. Down Fourth Cross Street the shops spill into the street, stacks of gunny-bags containing provisions for the Sri Lankan kitchen. The pungent smell of garlic, onions, chillies, and saffron all over, making you sneeze. There is a quiet here except for the clack-clack of trolley wheels and the voice of a labourer seeking passage with his heavy load. Sacks full of provisions change hands and are loaded onto carts and lorries. The traders sit, cross-legged on small benches, totting up their profits in little notebooks. Tens of thousands of rupees could change hands in a day, all recorded in little notches and ticks in the notebooks.

Prince Street, so named by the Dutch as a compliment to the son of King Rajasinghe of Kandy, is the first street that runs across the 'cross' streets. Crockery, cutlery and crystalware were aplenty down this street. They also had exquisite ornaments. The fragile hand-painted Chinese vases richly tapestried wall hangings, paintings, and gaudily coloured plastic and ceramic ornaments had something special about them. The shops down Keyzer Street deal in a miscellany of items.

A few shops selling furniture stood apart. There was heavy and light furniture made of valuable woods as well as the not so valuable, the carvings on some of them

making them dearer. Main Street is the widest of all the streets that constitute the Pettah. It is also the place for sarees, the elegant outfit that never goes out of mode in Sri Lanka. The array of Indian sarees that is available is breathtaking.

Cool cottons in pastel shades are the hot favourite among women here as they are ideal to beat the heat. The richly textured and vividly hued sarees like the silks – Kanjeepurams, Manipuris, and Benares – are the best bet for any function. Then there are the common woollies and georgettes worn by the working woman. Handloom sarees made in Sri Lanka with their delightful blend of colours are rapidly gaining popularity. A saree for any occasion at any time of the day or night can be found down Main Street.

Off Main Street is a quaint little roadway named China Street. I went looking for chinaware: as the Sri Lankan and Indian batik sarongs coming in a riot of colours. Some of them are ready to wear, others have to be cut and sewn. But it is no problem. The tailor in the nearest shop will do it for you for a few rupees. I next got into Third Cross Street where the shops are filled with hardware. From nails to dog collars, anything can be found here. This street is also a homemaker's haven as most of the household fittings are available here.

Down Fourth Cross Street the shops spill into the street, stacks of gunny-bags containing provisions for the Sri Lankan kitchen. The pungent smell of garlic, onions, chillies, and saffron all over, making you sneeze. There is a quiet here except for the clackclack of trolley wheels and the voice of a labourer seeking passage with his heavy load. Sacks full of provisions change hands and are loaded onto carts and lorries. The traders sit, cross-legged on small benches, totting up their profits in little notebooks. Tens of thousands of rupees could change hands in a day, all recorded in little notches and ticks in the notebooks.

Prince Street, so named by the Dutch as a compliment to the son of King Rajasinghe of Kandy, is the first street that runs across the 'cross' streets. Crockery, cutlery and crystalware were aplenty down this street. They also had exquisite ornaments. The fragile handpainted Chinese vases richly tapestried wall hangings, paintings, and gaudily coloured plastic and ceramic ornaments had something special about them.

The shops down Keyzer Street deal in a miscellany of items. A few shops selling furniture stood apart. There was heavy and light furniture made of valuable woods as well as the not so valuable, the carvings on some of them making them dearer.

Main Street is the widest of all the streets that constitute the Pettah. It is also the place for sarees, the elegant outfit that never goes out of mode in Sri Lanka. The array of Indian sarees that is available is breathtaking. Cool cottons in pastel shades are the hot favourite among women here as they are ideal to beat the heat. The richly textured and vividly hued sarees like the silks – Kanjeeपुरams, Manipuris, and Benares – are the best bet for any function. Then there are the common woollies and georgettes worn by the working woman. Handloom sarees made in Sri Lanka with their delightful blend of colours are rapidly gaining popularity. A saree for any occasion at any time of the day or night can be found down Main Street. Off Main Street is a quaint little roadway named China Street. I went looking for chinaware: as the name suggested. A group of old men told me its days of china were over. Its name came from the Chinese quarter in the area. It did sell chinaware some years ago but now the shops there sell a variety of odds and ends such as ribbons and hairpins, saree borders, lace and linings.

Further away I came across Gabo Street which had a cure for all ills. The pavement was strewn with rusty old barrels filled to the brim with herbs having medicinal properties. This street specializes in nature's cures and sells herbal ingredients used in the preparation of native ayurvedic medicine – even herbal beauty preparations much sought after by the fair sex. Inside, the shops were filled with jars, bottles, tins and paraphernalia storing powders, flowers, essences, seeds, twigs, roots (at least that is what they looked like to me) and other ingredients-all of medicinal value.

A salesman proudly informed me that they 'had something (or everything)'. 'lady you want beauty aid?' he queried in broken English. Curious, I nodded my consent. Dipping his hand into the nearest barrel, which had seen better days, he held out a brownish powder in his palm which had a heavenly aroma. "lady, white sandalwood powder," he informed me. From time immemorial, white sandalwood powder has remained the basic ingredient for many a beauty preparation in the East. Opening and closing the lids of a dozen or so containers, the salesman pointed out their uses. They ranged from cures for the common cold and cough, skin eruptions, falling hair, heartburn, anything. It was the street of the materia medica of the East.

Sea Street in Pettah is worth its weight in gold, for this street trades in gold. At any given time of day you find scores of women seated inside the mirrored shops decked in jewellery and admiring themselves prior to striking a deal. The showcases are full of intricately carved solid gold jewellery. The gem-studded necklaces, bangles, earstuds, rings and pendants catching the rays of the sun and spotlights

wink and blink at passers-by and pull at their purse strings. Apart from these, there is another set of salesmen – the floating ones. Today you find them in one place, tomorrow they surface in another. Though they change their location, there is no change in the goods they sell-until, of course, they finish the stock. These floating salesmen of the sidewalk have a penchant for selling pens, cassettes, cigarette lighters, trinkets, imitation jewellery, kiddies' toys, and anything from bottle openers to garden shovels. Tucked in between the bigger shops are little curio shops easily missed by visitors. They stock fascinating items of copper, brass and silver. Aladdin's lamps, oil lamps, odd-shaped vessels and queer-looking ornamental weapons can be bought for reasonable rates which would not make a dent in your budget. Pettah also provides the "new shopping-under-oneroof" facilities. The three-storeyed People's Park Shopping Complex is one such. The other is the World Market, next to the Fort Railway Station. The special attraction here is the range of leather goods.

Walking in the Pettah invariably makes you hungry and thirsty. There are a few wayside cafes specializing in Muslim and Indian food. After tucking into a spicy vegetable patty, a mouth-watering honey ring made with ghee and sugar syrup or a melt-in-the-mouth Bombay sweet, and having washed it down with a faluda drink, you will be rearing to go again. Then there are the street performers who entertain the shoppers. A performing monkey and a snake were holding the attention of a large gathering down one street, while on another a street band was providing some toe-tapping rhythms.

Shopping in the Pettah is fun. Discovering something special is exciting. It also pays to beware of the swift-fingered population, not a Pettah speciality certainly, but something ever-present in the world's busy bazaars.

Pettah: Paradise Bazaar in Colombo



Footwear and clothing are displayed on the Pettah pavement.