

Snapshot of Memories of Bygone Livelihoods

Posted on



A S Nazeem's regular spot is in front of the Wellawatte Post Office

An age-old global tradition, street vending and hawking survive to date in the island. While the methods have undergone waves of modernisation, in Sri Lanka one could still see these good old-fashioned merchants plying their trade in ways it has been carried out for decades, if not centuries.

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We still have street hawkers walking down roads and alleys, marketing their goods or skill by shouting out or making a sound like ringing a hand-held bell. And there are vendors who offer their merchandise and expertise by the roadside.

The Cobbler

Sapaththu Mahanna



M Bhuminadan's daily routine includes mending shoes, umbrellas and bags

Driving towards Wellawatte, we kept our eyes peeled for roadside vendors and hawkers. We suddenly spotted two men near the post office. They were seated on small benches, each diligently bent over a shoe, shaded by umbrellas propped up alongside and surrounded by bunches of footwear, bags and umbrellas. We had found two roadside cobblers in a single spot!

Since 1985, A S Nazeem has been mending shoes at this location. He had learnt his craft by himself 33 years ago and had made most of his tools by himself. Fixing shoes, umbrellas and bags from 9am to 7pm, Nazeem, a resident of Mount Lavinia, is sought after by his customers today. In fact, he claimed to be the oldest cobbler in the area.

Seated near Nazeem, equally busy repairing a shoe, was Muniyandi Bhuminadan. He had set himself up back in the late 1980s in what seemed to be an ideal spot for business.

Bhuminadan had learnt the craft as a teenager and he, too, had made his own set of tools. These included various knives and tools required for removing nails.

Business appeared to be brisk: several stopped by to collect or hand over another shoe to be repaired. Therefore, we headed on, in search of other vendors.

The Kerosene Seller

Bhoomithel Karaththay



Chandanam journeys through Colombo with Khillari and his bhoomithel karaththay



Chandanam delivers kerosene to his clientele from morning till afternoon

Many in Colombo would have caught sight of the pillar-box red barrel propped up horizontally on a bullock cart as it trotted along the streets or was halted somewhere. With 'Lanka' written in Sinhala at the end of the barrel, it was the unmistakable carrier of kerosene oil.

Leisurely driving the bullock cart was Chandanam, bearing a pleasant face and looking comfortable in a Panama hat. He resided in Maradana and recalled his grandfather and father selling kerosene in the same way.

Chandanam has been delivering kerosene to his clientele for around 55 years and was clearly content with his profession. His regulars comprised food shops, residences and temples as well as small-scale kerosene resellers who retailed in small quantities.

Unlike in the old days, not many filling stations sold kerosene now; so Chandanam has been buying his supplies for years from a sole dealer in Slave Island. While a full barrel would hold a lot more, he dealt with around 250-300 litres every day.

From around 8.30am until about 2pm, Chandanam delivered kerosene, fulfilling orders placed by his clientele throughout Colombo. In the evenings, after concluding his deliveries, he pedalled out on his bicycle to collect money from his clients who had bought oil on credit. We were also introduced to his trusted aide. The ox with a regal demeanour that has been pulling the cart for the past seven years was Khillari, named after his breed. Saved from slaughter at the age of three, Khillari is as famous as his owner. He was often paired with another ox to pull the chariot during Aadi Vel. People also commissioned the pair for weddings – occasions where Khillari got hitched to a more embellished cart.

Chandanam was at the end of his daily deliveries when we spoke with him and he was impatient to get back home with Khillari. As we watched, Chandanam hopped on to the side of the cart and the pair hurried off, beating the four-lane traffic on Galle Road.

The Knife Sharpener

Pihiya Muwath



V Anandan sharpens knives and scissors with his customised apparatus in Kotahena

We criss-crossed the maze of streets in Pettah and Kotahena before meeting V Anandan on the bustling Kathiresan Street in Kotahena.

A resident of Mattakkuliya, Anandan sharpened knives and scissors from 7.30am until 5.30pm. His knife sharpening unit was deftly positioned between a high wall and a street teeming with pedestrians, bicycles, goods carts, three wheelers and trucks. It was actually the machine that we had stumbled upon before tracing Anandan.

It was his father who had taught Anandan the trade and he has been working since

he was 22 years old. In fact, he had made the apparatus together with his father and brother-in-law with whom he had plied the trade previously. After his father and relative had passed on, Anandan had continued the business. He was not only skilled at sharpening knives and scissors, but also knew how to repair the mechanism and replace the grinding stone, which needed replacement periodically. Anandan seemed to be well known and sought after in the area.

The Fisherman

Maalu Karaya



With the katha on his shoulder, Salaman walks along the bustling streets of Panadura

The katha or kadha is something that vendors carry on a long pole across their shoulders, with goods placed on two flat baskets that are suspended from the edges of the pole on ropes. It is not often nowadays that one comes across such sellers. The few that are seen around town often sell fish or crab.

One such fish seller was Salaman. We found him on a street buzzing with sellers, buyers as well as motorists near a public market in Keselwatte, Panadura, after searching for such a merchant for hours. It was a team effort, joined by other vendors and three-wheeler operators nearby, that enabled us to zero in on him. When we came upon Salaman, he had laid down his kadha in front of a gate and was selling river fish he had caught that morning.

Hailing from Moratuwa, Salaman had followed in the footsteps of his father in the trade, in which he had been engaged since around 16 years of age. He had been a regular seafarer in the past, heading out at least 12km offshore to catch fish. Now he did that only once in a while because going out to sea meant he had to start early, around 4am, and the weather dictated whether he went out or not. On the contrary, river fish could be caught later in the morning, so Salaman preferred to catch and sell river fish.

To vend the fish that he caught in the nearby river, Salaman came to this market area twice every morning. He had a few more fish remaining on his basket and looked eager to carry on with his business, so we took our leave.

As quaint as it may seem, these street vendors and hawkers are an integral part of our lives. They provide an essential and handy service that will hopefully continue for decades to come. It is also an absolute joy to be able to encounter the fond memories of bygone livelihoods.