

The Dawn Traders at Pamunuwa

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The Pamunuwa Road comes alive during the early hours of the day

Clothes Clothes Clothes! Everywhere you look, and it wasn't even dawn

yet! We had come for an early morning adventure among the wholesale clothes sellers at Pamunuwa Road, Maharagama (a suburb located about 18km from Colombo)

Words Manori Wijesekera **Photographs** Indika De Silva

It's called Pamunuwa city, Pamunuwa village and even Pamunuwa market. As long as you say Pamunuwa, people will know what you're talking about. This road has become synonymous with cheap readymade garments, fabric and cut-piece textiles.

It all began with the growth of garment factories in the 1980s. As the factories looked to offload their excess products or those which had not met quality standards due to a small defect, a niche was created for small traders who began purchasing these clothes from factories and selling to local consumers at a low rate. The Pamunuwa road, located almost next to the main bus stand in Maharagama became home to a few clothes stalls in late 1970s, and with the growth in garment factories in the vicinity, the stalls began to grow in number too. Today, the road is completely packed with shops, small stalls and even pavement hawkers – each one selling you some kind of textile, clothing or related accessory. Over the years, the traders sourced their clothes from factories all over the country, and a thriving business in readymade clothes of all kinds was established.

Our adventure at dawn was not to explore these clothes shops, but rather the exclusive group of street-sellers who do a brisk business at dawn along this road. These are the wholesale traders who bring factory or home-made clothes, in bulk for purchase by shop owners and street hawkers from around the island.

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They set up their shops as early as 2am, and have to pack their unsold products and leave the area by 8am so that the “daytime” traders can begin their day. It's a fascinating array of clothes – for men, women and children. T-shirts in every hue, dresses, skirts, shirts, and frilly girl's dresses were found aplenty.

About half the products we saw in our browsing seemed to be factory-made and the excess or rejected items from small garment factories. The traders told us that in the 1980s and 1990s, they did a brisk business in branded clothes which were sold

for a song. The rest of the items are home-sewn clothes, often made with “cut-piece” fabric (fabric left over after cutting a pattern, sold in bulk as fabric waste by factories). Enterprising tailors have created an amazing array of clothes from these cut pieces – ranging from children’s clothes, to ladies blouses, skirts and even dresses. And there are some really good bargains to be had if you have the patience to browse through and negotiate with the traders.

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Sanjeewani was one such enterprising trader who was doing a brisk sale in dresses for young girls when we came across her stall. She usually comes in around 2:30am and leaves around 5:30am to return home and send her 12-year old daughter off to school. During the day, Sanjeewani and a group of women sew the dresses and skirts which she sells to wholesale buyers every morning. Employing four other women on a full time basis, as well as outsourcing some work to another 10 women who work in their homes, Sanjeewani has built up a regular business during the past eight years.

For traders like Sanjeewani, the wholesale market is an economic lifeline. And for the buyers, shopping at the Pamunuwa morning market is the best deal in town. They come from all parts of the island, as far away as Haputale in the mountains or from Batticaloa and Moneragala in the east. They buy sackfuls of clothes in deals that are done at lightening speed. I was later told that the traders and buyers have been in the business for so many years that they hardly need to negotiate anymore. Visiting the Pamunuwa road at dawn was an eye-opener. It’s an artery of Colombo’s economic life that goes unseen and unrecognised. But watching the volume of clothes that were being sold, it was obvious that Pamunuwa was making an impact across the country.

If you’re having a sleepless night in Colombo, then drop by Pamunuwa Road to experience an early morning buzz – real life happening at a brisk pace while the rest of the city sleeps.

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