The Market That Never Sleeps

Posted on
Bags of vegetable groupings offer a kaleidoscope of bright colour

It is the market place that keeps a once sleepy town awake all night long and active all day through with its hustle and bustle. In Dambulla is the vegetable market that never closes its gates, but is on its toes 24/7, busy setting the price you pay for your vegetables. The only exception is on full moon Poya days when itunwinds with a well earned sabbatical.

Words and **Photographs** Manu Gunasena

Here at the Dambulla Economic Centre, which celebrates its sixteenth anniversary this month after being opened on April 1, 1999 by President Chandrika Bandaranaike Kumaratunga, life is a vegetable buzz. Popularly known as the Dambulla vegetable hub, it has become the undisputed centre of vegetable dealings in the land. Most of the vegetables on the tables of Lanka today have most probably gone through its dynamic portals and emerged with their price tag fixed.

Here the day begins early, in fact long before the sun has awoken and the rooster has sounded its cock-a-doodle-do. At four in the morning the silence of the

Dambulla air is broken by the roar of the lorries rolling into the market. They come from Jaffna and with them they bring the first fresh cargo of the day, comprising of red onions, carrots, beetroot, ladies' fingers, potatoes and pumpkins. And even some Jaffna plantains too. The lorries turn into their appointed locations at the centre where the shops of their agent are located. At this time of the morning, the entire floor area where the goods are unloaded is clean having been washed through the lull in the night.

The Dambulla Economic Centre complex is made up of three massive hangars, each large enough to garage a Boeing aircraft. Two rows of shops flank each hanger, leaving a large ground area to hold the cargo of vegetables and fruits brought in every day. The immediate front area of each shop is exclusively reserved for the shop's own stock of the day. There are 24 shops of equal size in each row. With two such rows in each hangar and three hangars in the complex, there are 144 shops in the entire centre.

One major difference between Colombo's Manning Market and Dambulla's Economic Centre is that here the shop owner is not a seller but purely an agent, mainly of the seller. His job is to facilitate the transactions for which a standard commission is charged from the seller on the turnover.

The middle of the ground area is reserved for vehicular traffic. Each lorry, van, tractor or three wheeler drive in and unload their cargo on the side where their agent's shop is located. This system, though it inevitably causes some traffic jams, nevertheless ensures a smooth and convenient flow of goods right to the door step of the agent's shop.

Whilst the first batch of the Jaffna lorries have arrived and are being unloaded, the second wave starts. With the break of dawn begins the flow of vehicles carrying imported food stuffs, which have arrived earlier at the Colombo Port. A great variety of imported goods, amongst them dhal or lentils, onions, sugar, garlic, ginger, potatoes and even dried fish and sprats are brought here to be purchased for distribution throughout the island.

Along with this tide comes the local traffic. They come in small vans, tractors, three wheelers, hand drawn trolleys and barrows, carrying small quantities of vegetables grown in the surrounding areas of Dambulla. By ten in the morning the lorries coming down the mountains begin to arrive. From Nuwara Eliya, Badulla, Bandarawela and Gampola areas they bring cauliflower, leeks, beetroot, lettuce,

cabbages, capsicums and other up country produce. From Kandy will come cabbages, chillies, pepper and okra. From Anuradhapura will arrive aubergines, ash plantains and beans, to name a few. These vehicles from all parts of the country will continue to arrive during the course of the day though the traffic peters out after noon.

Once the produce has been unloaded at the agent's area outside his shop, he will quote a price for the goods. Generally this will be based on the previous night's closing price but as the morning wears on, so will the initial price. The market would have set a new price depending on the market forces of demand and supply existing at that time. Once this price has been agreed upon by the seller and the shop owner, this will be their minimum price.

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While this inflow is happening there is movement taking place in the outflow aspect of the operation, too. Potential buyers turn up early to see what the new day has brought, to inspect the goods, to check on the prices in the market prevailing at that time—for prices can fluctuate depending on new arrivals—he will then make an offer to the agent.If the price is right, the deal will be struck immediately and cash will be paid. The seller too will get his amount in cash, with the shop keeper's commission deducted. The cardinal rule governing all transactions is 'cash on the deal'.

This is this policy that oils the wheels, guaranteeing the operation proceeds smoothly. It is not due to distrust but due to convenience. On the contrary, trust is vital. Relationships, especially between the farmers – that's the sellers – and the agents, have been long and assiduously cultivated. It is the cornerstone of their success.

In fact many shop owners lend money without interest or collateral to the farmer to purchase the seeds, the water pumps and pipes, the pesticides and the fertilizers required for their cultivations. Once the crop is harvested the farmer sells his yield to the shop owner who recovers his loan and sells the remainder as his agent. This system ensures that the shop keeper has a regular supply line where the sellers will bring their vegetables to him and to no other and it doesn't take long for the parties

to realise that honesty is the best business policy.

The Dambulla hub seems to represent the kind of market place which 18th Century economist Adam Smith described as the ideal pure market of capitalism, one where there are a large number of buyers and sellers both having the necessary information as to the demand and supply of the goods which form the subject matter of their transaction. The agent, being privy to the available supply and the expected demand, conveniently slips in to play the pivotal role to establish the proper market price. And what these three parties think is the wholesale equilibrium price of carrots, for instance, becomes the retail price of carrots nationwide. So the next time you do your shopping at the supermarket or *pola*, remember the price you pay for a kilo of carrot was determined, the previous day at Dambulla's vegetable hub.