# The Roaming Pottery Sellers

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Colourful pottery sets for young children

**During church feasts pottery sellers travel from one place to another at times for as long as a month where they become part of the festivities.**

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The air was somewhat limp of movement. It was not the best time of day to see a flurry of customers jostling each other to grab the best deal. This corner souk, barren of people, made one wonder whether most folks were having their regular afternoon ‘forty winks’. But for Anura and his mother from Anamaduwa, a slump in sales this time was worrying. The weekend had been good though. Thousands of visitors had somehow ambled amidst the pageantry to where they had pitched their tent. Competition was rife. Many were selling the same items at the same prices. Having travelled a distance to stay put at a single location for a month, away from home, meant serious business for this ‘roaming salesman’ and his family. For company, besides his mother, Anura had hundreds of earthen pots as he lounged on a bunk bed under a temporary shelter of corrugated sheets.

This quarter was the bazaar of earthenware sellers. They had congregated in the vicinity of the Basilica of Our Lady of Lanka in Tewatta, Ragama and will remain ‘plonked’ for a month. These roaming sales people are a regular sight at church feasts in the suburbs of Colombo. Church feasts are times of festivity and revelry, the carnival atmosphere surrounds the church with special fairs selling items from sweets, garments, toys, jewellery to pottery.

The colour of earthenware is a most pleasing sight. The simplicity in this earthy product in varying sizes and shapes blend well with nature, while exuding an air of rustic beauty associated with rural living. Cooking pots of varying sizes were stacked in numbers; the latest addition of pots, which can be used in gas cookers prominently displayed at all the booths. Decorated wind chimes in clay, dangled beautifully even without the usual tinkling sound. In addition, clay cookers, water jugs, decorative bird baths and pots were piled under the most unadorned tents in large numbers, where the stall owners had their beds and hung their clothes.

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A visit to the pottery souk will certainly bring back childhood memories of playing house with siblings and cousins, a very natural childhood pursuit among Sri Lankan children. A set of rudimentary pots bound together and stacked in large numbers could not be missed. The ‘kids collection’ of six pieces came in two sizes and many colours; one set for children under ten years and a bigger set for older children interested in cutting their teeth in the art of cooking. Savvy in their knowledge of what sells fast, it is after all every child’s longing to have a set of pots to cook, as they are often shooed away from the kitchen. Amidst such fascinating objects on display unfolded a day in the life of these travelling sales people.

The pottery sellers were stirred from their leisurely disposition by the arrival of Sunethra, the mobile tea seller, who was one among many peddlers making quick cash as service providers to these sellers who were living away from home. Malini from Minuwangoda, sipping her tea was quite an amiable sales woman who had recently spent a month at a church compound in Wattala, where the feast had culminated in a similar carnival like fair. She admitted that the weekend of the church feast had brought in hordes of people, although the days that followed had a slump in sales.

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These pottery sellers from Minuwangoda were not pottery makers by occupation. They purchase these items in bulk from manufacturers in Panduswasnuwara. Most of them however, hailed from families that have been selling earthenware at church feasts while supplying them to shops around the island. Dalin Nona, now 57 years of age remembered accompanying her parents to church feasts in Wattala and Dalugama. She even recalled making clay lamps at the age of eight. Her parents, she reminisced, had known the art of pottery making, although today her family depended on external manufacturers for their supply. The finest days of frequenting church feast fairs had been with her parents, because her parents had a passion for it. Not any more, claimed Dalin Nona, who had not attended any other church fair this year owing to high costs for rent and transportation. Saman was a young man

from the same village as Dalin Nona and his interest in the business came after marriage as it was his in-laws' occupation. He too intended to stay at his tent for a month, but thanks to extra hands assisting him, he was able to visit his family now and then.

Pradeepa was confident that business would return to normal in the days to come. Being a more spirited marketer, Pradeepa and her family frequented other 'popular' church feasts in the country. Despite the slow flow of customers that day, Pradeepa had a larger stall with a choice of earthenware products, which showcased the good judgment of an energetic entrepreneur.

Family support was an incentive if not essential for a business that demanded a great deal of travelling. Many were the sellers who were braving the rain and the sun to spend days and nights under a makeshift tent in the hope of making money. These plucky sellers were battling it out to sell simple earthenware products from 50 to 500 rupees, hoping that the powers residing in the hallowed precincts of the church would look upon them with favour. A stroke of luck amidst all the drudgery may not be a nonsensical thought after all, as the lottery seller had a field day of sales among the pottery sellers who had time to bide, while waiting for evening to bring in more customers.

