Thrice Blessed Puttalam

Posted on
The new skyline: the windmills of energy

Nature’s bounty of fish, salt and now wind power has given this lagoon town new buzz and boom

Words and Photographs Manu Gunasena

Puttalam does not exist in history’s rock and lime stones; it does not live in the past. Puttalam lives and breathes in the present, vibrant in the invigorating ozone air that breezes relentlessly from its long Indian Ocean coastline.

For long dismissed as a small, quaint old fishing village, Puttalam is today nothing of the sort. Puttalam is the spot 133km from Colombo where the west coast rail track literally stops and the unmarked, northern frontier begins. It is on the inland side of the lagoon that begins at Kalpitiya, extends down to Udduppi and rises up to Vanathavilluwa which forms a lagoon line 70km long. Within this ring of water, comprising part of the Puttalam electorate, this once a forgotten town of fish and salt has transformed itself into a throbbing hub of activity. Today, to the surprise of many, its booming vocations and industries have become indispensable to the life of Sri Lanka.

Take fish for starters. For long the lagoon has provided them from the bounty of her waters without stint. Puttalam crabs and Puttalam prawns have become brand names. Much in demand in the rest of the country, they fetch fancy prices in Colombo's seafood restaurants and occupy top billing on the gastronomic menu. Each morning small fishing boats bring their catch of the day to Puttalam's fish market. It is a mix of fish and shellfish.

It's not only the day's fish, fresh from the lagoon's water that is sought after but also the fish dried in the Puttalam sun. Along the lagoon belt hugging Puttalam town is a number of small *karawala wadiyas*. Here fish are cleaned, sliced and then placed on coir nets on the ground and left to be sun kissed into a salty delicacy that can be stored for ages.

Along with the fish, the crabs and the prawns, the sea water of the lagoon has also bestowed upon Puttalam its mainstay resource from which it gets its name. Salt. The origin of the name Puttalam is Uppuththalam, which generally means 'salterns.' It is the salt of the sea that has made Puttalam the salt of the earth for centuries. And Puttalam lives by it; and so does Sri Lanka take a lot more than a pinch of this indispensable mineral.

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But the salt of the sea cannot be just rinsed and taken by the handful. It has to be extracted from the brine. And though the sun lends a helpful Herculean hand to deliver the substance, the proper conditions must first be created to obtain the marine mineral. Two kilometres from Puttalam on the Mannar Road, is the salt lake of Thammenna, It covers an area of 1,200 acres inclusive of two reservoirs which comprise 560 acres. The Yala season begins in January when the sluice gate is opened and water from the lagoon is let in to fill the large reservoir.

After being stored in it for a month to increase the salt density level, it is then pumped into a smaller recovery area. After being stored again for a month it is released into shallower distribution canals until finally it is released into the basins called the *kachchachipattu* or *waikkals* until the required density of 29 percent is achieved. Then in May the salt is harvested and the season ends in June, in time for the Maha season to begin. This ends before the rains arrive in October. The annual

salt production is approximately 20,000 tonnes.

On the border of the salterns and the lagoon, is a new giant in town, commandeering its skyline are giant steel towers standing like silent sentinels of the land, facing the sea to capture a new source of energy.

These are the modern windmills, keeping watch on the way the wind blows and changing their rotor blade faces at its direction to harness wind power. These 800 kilowatt wind turbines, currently 25 in number, are situated in wind farms approximately 3.5km in length and are found on both sides of the lagoon belt. Being 60m in height, they can be seen from many a spot in the peninsula and contribute 20 megawatts to the national grid.

The steady winds that habitually blow across the Puttalam Lagoon have inspired the authorities to place these structures on Puttalam ground. Until now, Puttalam has been twice blessed by nature with two free bounties of the sea: fish and salt. Now this ‘quaint’ town had been thrice blessed. Nature has bestowed her again with a bounty from the sky: wind power. And all for the enduring benefit of the entire island.

Directly opposite Puttalam on the other side of the lagoon in Norocholai on the road to Kalpitiya is another power boon granted to the masses. This time it is not a bonanza from nature but from a 900 megawattcoal fired power station popularly known as Norocholai Power Station. It was commissioned in September 2014. This massive power house now joins hydro and thermal electricity stations to provide Sri Lanka with her energy needs. Another boast of Puttalam is that it also plays host to one of Sri Lanka’s largest cement factories, which produces 40 percent of the country’s cement requirement.

Puttalam occupies a prominent place in the Coconut Triangle. Flanking the roads on both sides of the lagoon, be it the Mannar road or the Kalpitiya road, are large coconut estates, which have made Puttalam the second largest producer of coconuts in the country. Though Puttalam has a tropical savanna climate, in certain parts of the area, vegetables normally grown only in the cool climes of Nuwara Eliya, such as cabbages, carrots, gherkins, thrive. This is attributed to the availability of pure fresh water a mere 1.5m underground.

Further up on the Kalpitiya road is the famous Talawila Church, dedicated to St. Anne. The church, which celebrated its 250th anniversary two years ago, is one of

the country’s most popular Roman Catholic shrines and thousands of Catholics visit it each year, especially during the feasts held in March and August.

At the end of the Kalpitiya road is the Old Dutch Fort built at the start of the 18th Century to protect trade and commerce. Its walls are 2.28m wide and 2.43m high.

All three major communities, the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims live in the Puttalam district but in the town area Muslims are predominant. At the centre of the town, and bordering the lagoon, is the large Mohiddeen Jumma Mosque, said to be over 150 years old.

Finally there is Puttalam’s unofficial mascot: the famous Puttalam *buruwa* (donkey). Though used as a term of ridicule today by those who are unaware of its importance in the days of old, the hardy Puttalam donkey was used as the beast of burden to transport on its back bags of salt from Puttalam to the kingdom of Kurunegala. It was then the harbinger of salt, braying the good news of its much awaited arrival.

Today, Puttalam continues to fulfil that role and is the welcome bringer of not only fish and 35 percent of the nation’s salt requirement, 40 percent of the nation’s cement needs, fruits and up country vegetables, sun dried fish and pond bred prawns, but also wind and coal power to light the hearth and heart of Sri Lanka with a warm and happy smile.