

A Way of Life: Sleeping Pettah



Nattami carts neatly organised on Central Road

As dusk turns to night, the streets of Pettah take on a different form. Street lights glow brightly as the busy hive of activity slows down, you would think that Pettah is turning in for the night. Yet, amidst the deceiving silence, sounds of life echo as Pettah transforms into one of the most happening places after dark!

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Bath on!

The clock strikes midnight and we drive along Reclamation Street to explore Pettah. The atmosphere was one of joviality. In circles we drove along Barber Street, Quarry Road, Armour Street, Central Road and Jinthupitiya Street, covering the areas of Pettah, Kochchikade and Grandpass. It was a way of life that does not sway to the changing tides.

Along Central Road, we came across hundreds of carts that are hand-pushed by the Nattamis, men who transport goods from one place to another. Nattamis are found only in Pettah and they work all day long taking respite only during the night.

We journeyed along Jinthupitiya Street, three-wheelers were aligned perfectly on both sides of the road forming neat rows. The owners, who are also the drivers of these vehicles keep their three-wheelers in such designated areas and retire to their homes nearby. A single person will be assigned to keep an eye on the vehicles during the night. Everyone will take turns each night to perform this duty.

Along the narrow roads we went, experiencing Pettah by night. As we exited from Vivekananda Hill, our attention was drawn to the throbbing sounds of popular music coming from the vicinity of the Mohammed Mathoor playground. Groups of youngsters were enjoying the night dancing and singing.

Even during the early hours of dawn, there were people around, and of course young ones enjoying the night after a long day's work. It was Saturday night after all!



Parked unimaginably close to each other on Jinthupitiya Street

Though the streets may seem empty, hints of life could be seen and heard at various points. Pettah is primarily a commercial district, however it is also somewhat residential with the homes of many of the shop owners, workers and taxi drivers in the vicinity.

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being brought in.

As we approached Abdul Hameed Street, an atmosphere of a night bazaar came into our view. Bright lights illuminated the shops where spicy meals were being prepared for the all-nighters looking to comfort their hunger pangs. The street was somewhat crowded too as people hurried here and there.

Just a short distance away on Capital Hill once again, almost 200 three-wheelers were parked on both sides of the road creating an endless line of colour glowing in the night light. We continued our drive passing Aluth Kade, Kochchikade and headed towards Pettah bus stand.

The *Kelae Pola* (කලාපොල) was in full swing, with vegetables from all over being brought in to sell. Operating from ten in the night to ten in the morning, many of the vegetables, fruits and greens have been grown by the sellers themselves. Not only were there individuals but also wholesalers and shopkeepers buying their stock. The reason as to why this market is called the *Kelae Pola* is that many of the unusual types of produce and green are available among the more common varieties. Stacks of banana and king coconut were neatly placed though with the rains there was less than usual.

As we left Pettah still in the darkness of dawn glistening with a star like glow, we pondered on a way of life that is unique to the inhabitants of the area. Much happens when Pettah is sleeping...



