

Sri Lanka: A photo essay on Colombo's porters—a centuries-old practice of inhuman exploitation

Shantan Kumarasamy
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Nattami, a term derived from the Tamil language, specifically refers to manual labourers or porters exclusively involved in loading, unloading and transporting goods, particularly between Colombo harbour, the warehouses and Pettah, the capital's oldest trade hub and largest market. Nattami are a lesser-known section of the city's working class.

Photographed at daybreak, the following photo essay provides a glimpse of the working day of Pettah-porters. From the quiet moments when they gather at the Pettah Market in the early hours before dawn, to the hours of physically taxing tasks they undertake with few breaks, these images reveal the lives of a section of the international working class almost entirely ignored by mainstream media and the trade unions.

Pettah, located in the historic heart of Colombo, is one of the primary hubs where nattami gather to seek daily employment. Surrounded by colonial-era buildings and modern high-end hotels and spas, nattami carry heavy loads weighing anywhere from 40 to 90 kilograms at a time, often exceeding their own body weight, through the area's narrow and congested streets.

Pettah-porters constitute a significant section of the Sri Lankan urban workforce, subsisting on a varied and bargained wage that depends on one's physical stamina. They literally carry out the gruelling tasks related to an important aspect of trade and logistics in the capital city, upon which the businesses in the market heavily depend.

With a job profile dating back to the Middle Ages, nattami work has been sustained and expanded through three successive colonial administrations—Portuguese, Dutch and especially the British—and by local Colombo

administrations well into the present day.

Despite Colombo's transformation into a modern trade and strategic port city, the nature of the job has seen no noteworthy changes over the centuries. It remains one of the most exploited layers of the Sri Lankan working class, largely drawn from oppressed minorities and rural toilers.

From dawn through dusk and well into late night, these porters carry massive loads of commodities such as rice, vegetables, construction materials and other goods. They work in the punishing heat, through the pouring monsoon rains, and amidst the constant and ceaseless bustle of Colombo's busiest streets.

According to rough estimates, a nattami earns between 1,500 and 3,000 rupees per day (approximately four to eight US dollars), barely enough to cover the necessities of life in Colombo, where the cost of living continues to rise. The cost of housing, which is particularly high, consumes the largest share of their pay, even for a slum dwelling.

In November 2021, and just before the mass popular uprising that began in April 2022 and brought down President Gotabaya Rajapakse and his government, the porters went on strike to demand a 15-rupee per load increase in their rates to counteract rising inflation. They pointed out even a cup of tea was now costing them 25 rupees.

Nattami are paid, not according to the hours they work, but on the weight of the goods they transport on their backs or on rudimentary trolleys. Tea plantation workers in Sri Lanka are paid per kilogram of tea leaves plucked but, in contrast to nattami, are still considered wage employees. Most nattami work six

days a week, toiling an average of over nine hours a day under these harsh conditions.

According to one recent and rare study, the brutal physical demands of this work means that Pettah-porters are plagued with musculoskeletal disorders, chronic pain and other debilitating health problems. No official statistics concerning their lives and their work are available because they are part of the so-called “informal labour force,” which is estimated to be in the thousands, and mainly between the ages of late-teens and the early sixties.

Beyond the workplace, their living conditions are marked by overcrowded accommodation in slum areas with little sanitation, inadequate nutrition because they cannot afford a balanced or nutritious diet, and limited access to medical care. These conditions, entrenched since colonial times, continue to impact the health, life expectancy and overall well-being of these workers, many of whom struggle to sustain their day-to-day working life existence and provide for their families.

Nattami are one of the most vulnerable sections of the working poor, severely affected by the ever-rising cost of living. They, like millions of other Sri Lankan workers, now face the disastrous impact of the International Monetary Fund austerity measures now being imposed by President Dissanayake’s Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna-led National People’s Power government.



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