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## ***Bath* packets and gendered urban experience in Colombo**

### **Abstract**

Rice is a staple in Sri Lanka and is often eaten with three or more condiments. The article explores the modes in which this staple transforms itself when it becomes a packaged commodity of 'rice and curry' (*bath* packets) in the city. Tracing the making, selling, and buying of *bath* packets, I build a three-pronged intertwined narrative, of: (i) gender performativity and perception in making, selling, and buying of *bath* packets (ii) the implicit socio-economic codes and urban imaginations, and (iii) how the *bath* packet is itself transformed based on where and to/by whom it is sold. Conceptually, the *bath* packet and people involved in making/selling/eating it are not analysed as merely operating in the urban, but the urban as a co-constituent of this relationship which renders food as a socio-cultural construct. The article primarily engages with urban knowledge production, its appropriation, legitimization, conflict, and subversion, via the socio-cultural constructs, gendered relations, and environmental processes around food.

**Keywords:** Urban Imaginations, Knowledge Production, Southern Theory, Sri Lanka

### **Introduction**

*Bath* is a Sinhala term for cooked rice, which is a staple in Sri Lanka. Accompanied by condiments (usually clubbed under the anglicised term 'curry') rice is often eaten for all the three meals. For this article, I investigate only the lunch practices via a very specific form of parcelled rice-and-curry, locally called the *bath* packets. The *bath* packets are prepared by eateries, households, contractors and sold either in-house or via vendors. These *bath* packets arrive in various shops, eateries, and on the streets of Colombo from around 11:00 AM and is sold until 3:00 PM.

*Bath* packets have been part of the Sinhala culture<sup>1</sup> for long and has been a popular portable format, although the commercial variant is new. The Sinhalese manner of rice-eating aids this format of a packet due to two reasons. First, rice and curry is

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<sup>1</sup> Rice and curry in various formats are also part of the culinary practices of various other ethnic groups of Sri Lanka and elsewhere in Asia. However, for this article, I concentrate on the Sinhala variant.

acceptable to be eaten at room temperature (usually between 25 and 30 Degree Celsius in Sri Lanka) even in restaurants. This allows the rice and curry to be cooked in the morning and packed for lunch, which can be eaten without reheating. Second, the *curries* are not very fluid in consistency (compared to other culinary cultures), resulting in easy packaging without leakages. What we would call *curry* is an amorphous term for three or more condiments. The usual number of condiments in the *bath* packet is five, consisting of one principal ingredient (meat, fish, or egg), one *parippu* (split red lentil), two sautéed vegetables, and one raw condiment.

*Bath* packet is what one gets from home to be had for lunch. The commercial variant imitates this, to form a replacement for regular meal, rather than a special meal that one occasionally eats at a restaurant. This understanding reflects in the cost as well. For example, one of the upscale and popular restaurants in Colombo, sells a vegetarian *bath* packet for LKR 220<sup>2</sup>, while at the same time, their *parippu* itself separately costs LKR 200. It is important to understand that socio-economically *bath* packet is not merely packaged lunch which one could have had in a restaurant, but is a commercial variant of what one would have brought from home. The cost should not be understood solely as an economic consideration, but the culture of portable rice-and-curry packets is an important factor in the formation of the *bath* packet as a commodity. There is a large variation in the cost of *bath* packets, starting from LKR 80 for a vegetarian to LKR 400 for chicken *bath* packet (a fivefold difference in cost).

To understand the urban via food, *bath* packet has to be investigated as a commodity, which emanated from and imitates the traditional rice-and-curry eating habits. Therefore, investigating what different *bath* packets imitate, becomes a ground to understand complex situated ontologies. These situated ontologies present a window to the contemporary sociocultural formations, from gender relations to class performances (Low and Lynn-Ee Ho, 2018). As the commodity of bath packet is causally related to urbanization, it helps us understand the urban. Herein, I refer to the urban whose understanding has long been argued to be biased, due to ethnocentric North-Atlantic urban theory (Palat Narayanan, 2020). The bias here is that the urban is understood by using experiences from the North Atlantic cities, even when capturing life elsewhere (Connell, 2011). To decentre this bias, I highlight via *bath* packets, the plurality of conceptualizations regarding the city and the social relations therein.

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<sup>2</sup> To get a rough idea, 1 kilogram of regular white-rice in Colombo costs approximately around LKR 100.

I will illustrate these various facets with the focus on class and gender intersectionality (Parsons, 2016) using two cases of *bath* packet sellers. I build my arguments with Dinithi and Wishaka, both of whom sell *bath* packets less than 100 metres apart in a central Colombo district. These two cases are supplemented by qualitative fieldwork consisting of 20 semi-structured interviews, 50 qualitative surveys, and participant observations along with *bath* packet producers, sellers, and consumers.

## **Gendered Urban Experience**

There are wide-ranging practices related to food, from its preparation to consumption, which involve and co-constitute the urban. As discussed above, if *bath* packets imitate certain situated ontologies, it becomes pertinent to investigate different *bath* packets. For this article, I will juxtapose two sets of *bath* packets, one prepared by Dinithi and other, by Wishaka<sup>3</sup>. Dinithi sells her *bath* packet from a small juice shop, which her family owns. She started selling *bath* packets in 2017 and currently the cost ranges between LKR 325-375 (sells around 40 packets per day). Wishaka sells her *bath* packets on a temporary footpath stall. Wishaka started selling *bath* packets in 2019 and currently the cost ranges between LKR 120-200 (sells around 30 packets per day).

In 2016, Dinithi decided to take-over the otherwise rented family-shop, to start a 'healthy' juice bar. Soon, customers started demanding various eatables. Overtime, owing to her success with snacks, she decided to start making *bath* packets as well. Dinithi lives in a large house behind the shop, has maids and a cook. It was easy to use the existing help to oversee the production of *bath* packets. Contrarily, Wishaka was working in a jewellery shop, but became unemployed, as the owners decided to retire. Her mother used to sell *bath* packets few decades ago, and it was her who suggested Wishaka to sell them as an income source. Wishaka lives outside the Colombo municipal limits (urban, but land not as expensive as Colombo) and makes the *bath* packets at home with the help of her mother and sister. Her neighbour, who is associated with an office nearby, suggested her the current vending location.

Coming from different socio-economic and geographical locations, these two women produce (physically and socially) two different kinds of *bath* packets. Dinithi told me

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<sup>3</sup> Although the case examples I take here are both women, there is quite a gender parity between *bath* packet sellers. All names are pseudonyms.

that she wants her 'brand' to be recognized as a healthy alternative. She personally oversee all the ingredients being bought, prepared, and packaged. She said:

As a Buddhist we cannot give anything bad to people, especially food. You can donate your old clothes to someone, it just covers the body no. But food is not like that, it needs to be very clean, hygienic, and healthy. Also when you see the food you should feel like eating [referring to the poor quality of *bath* packets elsewhere]. We put a banana leaf in our packets, I personally make sure that it is washed and wiped.

Dinithi's *bath* packets come in paper boxes as opposed to wrapped in paper. Elsewhere in Colombo, when the cost of *bath* packet increases, the packaging shifts to paper boxes instead of paper wrapping. There is no evident utilitarian benefit of paper boxes, but it generally represents a more expensive variant of the *bath* packet<sup>4</sup>. To stress her claim about quality, Dinithi told me that she at times feed her own children with the *bath* packets.

For Wishaka, the primary motive of selling *bath* packet was economic. She casually said that it was a suitable business for her because she anyway cooks at home. For Wishaka, the *bath* packet was an expansion of her already existing responsibility to cook for her family. Wishaka, her sister, and mother, cut all the vegetables and meat, together in the evening. She said it is work, but is also a social occasion for them to sit and socialize. Next day morning, she (at times aided by her mother or sister) cooks the food and packs them. For her, the *bath* packet that she sells is exactly what she would have otherwise cooked for the family. Both Dinithi and Wishaka evoke a certain discourse of care emanating from their performance as 'mother', of caring for the family by nourishing them. For Dinithi, it is about overseeing every detail of the meal, while for Wishaka, it is about doing it herself. Furthermore, the *bath* packet is what one's mother (or wife) would have cooked. Thus, the commercial replacement invariably evokes the culturally-constructed feminine care-identity of 'home-cooked', although displaced to a non-related person. This person in the case of the *bath* packet can either be identified as man or woman. Both men and women selling *bath* packets show discursive practices of care and conceive practices that depict it in various forms, which are nonetheless class dependent (Dinithi and Wishaka being a case example of this).

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<sup>4</sup> Some of the vendors who sell variants like fried-rice or biriyani (perceived to be special, thus more expensive than a *bath* packet) almost always use a paper-box as packaging material.

Men often substitute the notion of a mother (or wife) to someone who is actually cooking these packets, although most men producing *bath* packets take an active role in it.

The discourse of care also reflects the locations from where they buy the ingredients and their class-based conceptions about the city. Dinithi buys most of her raw materials from a popular supermarket. The supermarket was used as a sign of quality when she described to me how healthy her *bath* packets were. She further stressed that she does not buy anything from Pettah (a large wholesale market in Colombo). Contrarily, Wishaka buys her vegetables from Pettah. She told me:

There is a large variety in Pettah and once you know the shopkeeper you get a good deal. The produce is fresh due to large turnover of the market. However, I buy fish from the local shop to easily carry it home without it going bad and meat from a nearby Muslim shop.

The quality of meat which Dinithi expects from the supermarket is qualitatively what Wishaka expects from the 'Muslim' butcher. The secular brand of supermarket and the specialized religious connotation of 'Muslim' butcher shop is a reference to class based differential understanding of food products (cf. Haniffa (2017) for more on religiosity of food and marginalization in Sri Lanka).

The value systems, perceptions, and identities of Dinithi and Wishaka reflect on their *bath* packets and thus, with those who buy them. When Dinithi started her business, she used online social media to market her products. Hidden behind the brand name of her shop, she offers 'home cooked' *bath* packets to be ordered online (or to be reserved via telephone). Wishaka has no brand name, it is her location that marks the specificity of her *bath* packets. She sits at the same location and over time has built her clientele. This clientele is, however, quite fluid in both the cases. As one *bath* packet producer told me "*bath* packet is the same, people change", signifying that people usually do not buy every day from the same place. Buyers do keep shifting; nonetheless, they shift amongst the same class of sellers. One of the *bath* packet sellers, who has been making and selling for more than two decades now, told me:

If you buy from me at the footpath, it is cheaper. I sell the same packet for more on XXX (a popular app-based food delivery system). If I sell in XXX at the same price, then no one will buy. They buy once, like the taste and buy again, but for them to know the taste they have to buy once.

The class which buys from Dinithi, look online for reviews and then order. Their notion of ‘home-cooked’ and ‘healthy’, derives from the iconography and text of the menu. The class which buys from Wishaka, walk around their workplace, see the seller and make their mind to buy (or try).

## **Conclusion**

In this very short outline of *bath* packets in Colombo, I have used the case to highlight three specific aspects. First, the class-based gender performativity of care in food. It explores the notion of home-cooked (‘cooked by mother’) as a symbolic gesture and being practised differentially (depending on class), when transformed to a commodity. Second, the differing conceptions of the city (or parts thereof), which also corresponds with how one operates in the city. Third, the overlapping class-based preferences of food (either perceived or actual) and related connotations like cost and packaging. I use Wishaka and Dinithi to highlight the differing gender performativity away from “monolithic images” (Mohanty, 2003: 519) even though they both self-identify as women. A larger case could also be made by comparing similar narratives from male *bath* packet producers/vendors, who in my study, operationalize within similar discourses to replace the care emanating from ‘home’.

The food and the urban co-constitute each other. An exploration on food (or urban food) not only enriches food studies, but urban studies as well. It presents differing conceptualization of urban (becomes evident through food choices), which in urban analyses is often neglected. Both food and urban are socio-cultural constructs, more studies are required to investigate how they co-constitute each other.

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