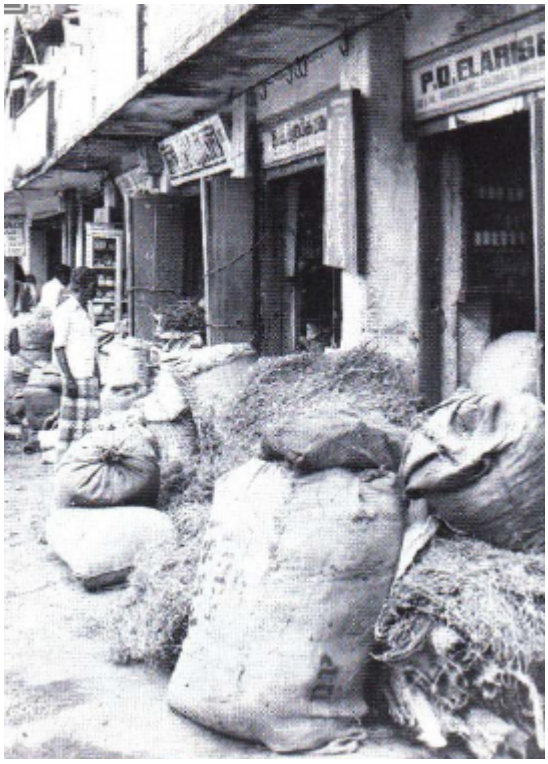
Gabo Lane: Pharmacy of Nature

Posted on

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What do you need to fill your prescription? Rare leaves and scented roots, healing herbs or soothing vines, emetic berries or curative seeds, exotics such as asafoetida or pomegranate, or is it even musk, which is only found in the navels of deer in the Himalayas? Whatever it may be, your ayurvedic prescription could be filled to your own, and your physician’s, entire satisfaction at Gabo Lane in the Pettah, in Colombo. Ayurveda, the science of healthy longevity and the treatment of physical pain and suffering, has been practised in Sri Lanka for more than two thousand years. The system of medicine which was brought by the early migrants from North India and later absorbed the herbal curative systems of the native inhabitants such as the Veddahs, Yakkhas and Nagas and that of the Dravidians of South India,

reached i zenith in the days of the ancient Sinhalese kings. The king of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa gave special place to ayurveda, and among the ruins discovered at Anuradhapura is that of an organized hospital, which ranks among the earliest examples of public curative centres in the history of man. There were kings in ancient Sri lanka who were well versed in the healing science of ayurveda, and the royal patronage given to it saw it flourish here for well over 1500 years. Ayurveda, in its two main branches of “Siddha” and “Unani”, the Hindu/Buddhist and Muslim schools respectively, was the accepted system of medicine and healing till Western medicine began to dominate after the arrival of the colonial powers from the 16th Century.

The continued existence of Gabo Lane in the bustling bazaar district of Colombo’s Pettah is proof of the important place that ayurveda still has in the lives of Sri Lankans. It is yet the first resort in illness by most of the island’s rural peasantry, and often the last resort by many, even in the cities, when Western medicine offers no hope. Although the traders in Gabo lane trace the history of the present location to the 1930s, the Pettah has had a special quarter dealing in ayurvedic medicines for more than a century.

The Pettah in Colombo, from the time it was transformed into a busy oriental bazaar from an important residential district, after the fall of the Dutch and the arrival of the British in the late 18th Century, has been a grid of cross-streets, most of them specializing in particular lines of trade. The strong demand for ayurvedic remedies from the first days of the bazaar district ensured a special quarter for those who traded in these products. Gabo Lane today a narrow passage tucked away in the eastern section of the Pettah. next to the modern Supermarket Complex could trace its history to times when there was much larger trading in what it offers.

Today it is a speciality lane of about 15 shops, close to the Street o the spices, the street of hardware merchants the several streets of textile merchants, the street of rice and pulses, and the street of goldsmiths. Through the many changes that the Pettah has undergone, Gabo Lane has retained its old world quality. While many of the Pettah cross-streets have changed in appearance with many modem buildings lining them, the little lane of herbs, oils and cosmetics has hardly changed over the years. The shops, with small entrances, are cavernous within. They are often dark, with little need for modem lighting, display and merchandising for their stock-in-trade. The aroma of fresh and dried herbs is all over, at times sickly sweet, often overpowering. The scent of sandalwood mingles with the pungent smell of asafoetida. There are herb and vines, leaves and roots, fruits, nuts and seeds.

flowers. resins, syrups and saps with varying medicinal properties – perfect examples of the six flavours of nature: sweet, bitter, salty, sour, pungent and astringent.

Large gunny-bags filled to the brim and even spilling over, with the various ingredient essential to the ayurvedic pharmacopoeia crowd the shops and extend to the kerb outside. As one makes slow progress through this veritable open-air herbarium, one is forced to avoid stepping on fresh herbs drying on mats spread out in the in the narrow passageway.

There is a brisk trade going on at Gabo Lane. It is both a wholesale and retail sales centre. The traders here while supplying the needs of medicinal herbs and herbal extracts and other ayurvedic specifics to the several hundred smaller ayurvedic dispensaries throughout Sri Lanka are also bulk buyers of these products from suppliers in different parts of the country. They also import herbs and Eastern medical preparations not found in Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, Thailand, Korea and China.

Over the centuries, ayurveda has developed a “materia medica” to treat almost all known ailments of man. Pushed to the background with the advance of Western medicine, the new interest in nature cures, health foods, and scientific investigations into the curative propenies of Eastern medicinal herbs has given a new fillip and brought new interest in ayurvedic medicines.

Russian sailors who come to Colombo make a bee-line to Gabo lane to obtain packets of dried “pol-pala”, a herbal tea, believed to be good for the kidneys, and popular in the Soviet Union. It is not unusual to see Western tourists looking for anything from white sandalwood powder or paste, a cosmetic known to Asian beauties for centuries, the genuine extract of “nelli” (phylanthus) which is known to be very rich in Vitamin C, or oil of the King Coconut to massage one’s scalp with.

The results of new research into herbal medicines carried on in Sri Lanka, India, China and many western countries have led to the traders of Gabo Lane being important suppliers of herbs to large Western pharmaceutical manufacturers producing drugs for the control of hypertension, and in the fight against some forms of cancer.

Talk to a salesman of any of the shops down Gabo Lane and he would promise to provide you with a cure for whatever ailment that has ever bothered you. Some will

quote stanzas of ancient Indian rishis, others will recite verses in Sinhala or Tamil, extolling the benefits of this plant or that. In all you will be told chat in a single shop at Gabo lane is a cure for anything from the common cold, heartburn, insomnia, hypertension, infertility, impotency, falling hair, asthma and the sixty-four different forms of cattarrh or an antidote for every symptom of advancing years.

The promise of Gabo lane is immense. There are powders and pastes to keep the glow of youth on one's skin. There are herbal oils which claim to help hair grow, give it more body, and even make it darker – the two latter attributes certainly vouched for by many. The four humours of the body being known to the ancient ayurvedic physicians too, there are cures aplenty for conditions affecting each of them – blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy.

There are herbs which according to legend had their beginnings in the mythical subterranean world of the Nagas, and others which one is told are remedies known to the Yakkhas (demons); no doubt specifics known to the ancient tribes of Sri Lanka which bore those names – Naga and Yakkha. There is wild honey taken as medicine by Sri Lanka's aboriginal Veddhas. Snake stones from South America which are known to help in curing snake-bite victims, and lotus roots regularly prescribed by ayurvedic physicians to "cool" the human system. Oils to enrich skin texture, to make muscles more supple, and those which will help heal fractures of the bones are not unknown at Gabo Lane. Similarly it is not difficult to obtain the five-fold portions of the "Beli" (Bael) tree – its leaves, bark, flowers, fruits, and roots, which good physicians say will cure any stomach disorder that does not need surgery. Whether it is gall-nut or bowstring hemp, sunflower to keep cholesterol in check or "mini-mal" (Lochnera rosea) now used by the West in the treatment of cancer, any of the medicinal varieties of ixora, seeds of lotus, flowers of jasmine, bark of bael, roots of castor, or even an elephant's jaw, Gabo lane has it all …

The Lane will fill your prescription with herbs, oils, ointments, unguents and "arishtas" or tonics. If medicine is not your need, you can pick here from a whole selection of the perfumed grass "savandra" to take with you to keep a whole wardrobe smelling naturally fresh, or screw-pine flowers to hang in dark comers to keep creepy insects away.

Today Gabo Lane in the Pettah is a whole exotic world away from the commercial bazaar which surrounds it. A rare world of medicine which could fascinate the healthy for hours (Researched by Sarasi Wijeratne).



Dried herbs and grain in storage boxes in a shop down Gaba Lane. (Suresh de Silva)



Measuring medicinal herbs to a prescription. (Suresh de Silva)