The City of Gems

Posted on

Lucien Rajakarunanayake

The island produces more beautiful and valuable rubies than are found in any other part of the world an likewise sapphires, topazes, amethysts, garnets and many other precious and costly stones.

When Marco Polo, the great Italian traveller who was a contemporary of Dante, Petrarch and Bocaccio, wrote these words about the gems of Sri Lanka, he was only echoing the impressions of so many other travellers who had described the island's gems and jewellery for more than a thousand years before that.

Ibn Batuta, the Moroccan traveller who came after Marco Polo, described his impression of the wealth and variety of gems and precious stones in the island in these words: "All the women in the island of Ceylon possess necklaces of precious stones of diverse colours; they wear them, also at their hands and feet, in the form of bracelets and anklets. The concubines of the Sultan make a network of gems and wear it on their hands. I have seen on the forehead of the white elephant several of these precious stones, each of which was larger than a hen's egg; I likewise saw in the possession of Arya Chakravarti a ruby dish as large as the palm of the hand, containing oil of aloes …

In fact from the time that Sri Lanka began to be known to the world, which was more than two millennia ago, it was known as the land of gems, pearls and precious stones. Fa Hsien, the Chinese traveller who crossed the Gobi Desert to India and then to Sri Lanka in the 4th Century A.O., writes of the "great ruby" above the Temple of the Tooth at Anuradhapura which shines "like a bright star" by night. Another Chinese writer who came after Fa Hsien says the Buddha had compassion on the people and "sprinkled the land with a dew, causing it to produce red gems." Pearls, sapphires, rubies and other precious stones were among the earliest known exports from Sri Lanka, and it is on record that these were among the gifts which King Devanampiyatissa sent to the Emperor Asoka of India in the 3rd Century B.C.

The legends of Arabia, the folklore of China, the stories of India and Indonesia and the reports of the early European travellers to the East are all full of the gems and jewellery of Sri Lanka. It is an old and unchallenged tradition that King Solomon obtained gems from Sri Lanka, together with elephants and peacocks, in his attempts to woo the Queen of Sheba, and there is considerable evidence that today's Port of Galle is the biblical Tarshish, which grew into fame as one of the best sources of gems in the ancient world. It is not surprising that the road from Galle to Ratnapura is still a short one, for it is from Ratnapura, the City of Gems, that most of the island's gems came, as they still do. Ratnapura, the fabled City of Gems mentioned in Scheherazade's story of Sinbad the Sailor, has been the source of most Sri Lankan gems through the centuries, and is still the place mentioned first in talking of the gems of Sri Lanka.

Situated just 60 miles east of Colombo, the soil of the Ratnapura District and its environs remains the richest in the land. Buried here are a variety of gems which few other countries could boast of. They include sapphires and rubies. cat' eyes and aquamarines, amethysts, topaz, zircons, tourmalines and garnets.

The richness of its gem-bearing soil made Ratnapura the prize possession of the Sinhalese kings, who had special officers of the Court in charge of gemming. From early times gems have been attributed with supernatural properties and they have been worn as charms to cure diseases, ward off evil, and overcome the ill-effects of astrologically inauspicious periods. These practices remain in Sri Lanka even today and it is not uncommon to see a person wearing a ring or pendant with nine precious stones as a constant good luck charm.

The difficulties in bringing out the gems hidden below ground, and the necessity to carry out the search in remote, jungle areas, have also led to a whole body of tradition and ritual being built around gemming and the sale of gems.

Traditional gemming, which is seen even during a brief visit to Ratnapura, involves two methods. The more common is the mining done in pits. The other is the panning of the river bed for gem-bearing gravel. Gem mining in Ratnapura and the nearby Ruwanwella (gem sand) area is still done in the same manner as in ancient days, except for the use of a few modern accessories like water pumps and electric lights. A gem mine in Ratnapura, or any other pan of Sri Lanka, is not a vast subterranean network of shafts and corridors, as in the gold and diamond mines in other countries. A gem mine is a single pit dug in a place where astrological signs more than geological indications have pointed to the presence of gems.

Before the first sod is cut for the gem pit, an elaborate ritual is conducted to appease the “bahiravas” or spirits of the earth which guard its treasures. These involve certain chants, the making of special offerings of cooked food, flowers and fruits, and ritual dancing and drumming before a specially constructed altar. These being done, the digging begins. In older days the water which seeps into the pit was removed with buckets, but this is now done with the u e of a motor-driven pump. The digging goes on and hope increases when one reaches the “illam” or gem-bearing gravel. Depending on luck and divine blessings, the “illam” may be close to the surface or as deep as a hundred feet. There could also be pits where there is no gem-bearing gravel at all.

Once the “illam” is reached, it is collected and lifted out in buckets for washing, which is when the gems, if any, are revealed. The gravel is washed in special, sturdy, conical, closely-woven baskets made of reed, which look more like giant versions of the farmers’ hats of Vietnam and South East Asia. The miners wash the gravel, a little at a time, moving the basket in a regular rhythmic rotation until all the mud is washed away and the coarse white quartz gravel is clearly seen. The washing continues slowly with the clear gravel being sifted until the practised eye catches the glint of colour of a gem.

Those who pan river beds for gems do so with the help of long poles to which are attached wide sweepers. The sites chosen are those which are known to bear gems and where the “illam” is close to the river bed. Once the gem-bearing gravel is found, the washing is done in the same manner as in mining. Very often the gems discovered in a pit are auctioned off at the pit-head itself. But always there is a strict code of tradition followed in sharing the price realized. There are fixed amounts which go to the miners, those who dig and do the washing, the man who supplied the bamboos and wood for shuttering and scaffolding, the supplier of the water pump and generator, the owner of the land if it is not the man who has invested in the project, and the investor himself.

It is not uncommon for gems to be sold in places other than at the pit, and Ratnapura has many places . where such sales take place. These traditional “auctions” of gems are not places where bids are shouted out loud in the open. Instead they are studies in discretion. The gem to be sold is passed around from hand to hand among those who have come for the auction. The bidding, where tradition is followed, is done by covering one’s fingers with a handkerchief and letting the next bidder touch your fingers under the cover. Each finger and phalange indicates a specific figure in thousands of rupees. It is more common today to see

the bids being made in barely audible whispers, involving several thousand rupees.

In recent years the State Gem Corporation, private gem dealers' associations, and the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce have organized special gem auctions in Colombo where buyers from many of the world's capitals have come to make their bids. Such gem auctions are often preceded by special gem exhibitions held at any of Colombo's five-star hotels. A visitor to Ratnapura will find it difficult to miss the sparkle of gems. The streets in this small city, which per square metre is the richest in the land, are lined with gem and jewellery shops and showrooms. In addition there are the itinerant gem sellers who will offer you a small sapphire, ruby or amethyst at a street corner, carrying all of his treasure tied up in a little handkerchief. Many a young boy in Ratnapura makes his living by selling these little fragments of gems, picked up near gem mines, or from the discards of the larger gem dealers.