The Goldsmiths of Sea Street

Posted on

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A Sri Lankan Sinhalese bride, wearing the typical gold jewellery that Sea Street is famous for.

Photo: Prasanna Hennayake “Sunday Times”

The entrance to Sea Street, from Colombo’s busy Pettah bazaar.

Walk down Gasworks Street in the Pettah, amidst the din and clatter of goods being unloaded from lorries. Men scurry hither and thither bearing sacks of goods on their back, their torsos gleaming with the sweat of their toil, sinewy muscles rippling in the scorching sun. The place hums with people who, for once on this sleepy isle, seem bent on accomplishing some set task. Here one feels the pulse of commercial Pettah, throbbing with the ebb and flow of the lives of the Sri Lankan people. It is as though a giant hand had lifted the top off an ant nest, and exposed beneath it the worker ants in their daily toil for their queen.

Leading away from this teeming life is Sea Street, flanked on either side by shops, the haunt of the bullion merchants. These shops with their glass cases of glittering gold jewellery, have an indecipherable Aladdin’s cave-like aura about them. Shop keepers stand at the entrance to each shop, raucously heralding passersby, vying with one another in their attempts to attract prospective customers.

If you accept their invitation and step into a shop, pausing momentarily on the threshold to accustom yourself to the fluorescent brightness within, a figure would

emerge with genie like suddenness, bobbing his head several times as he courteously bids you be seated, and with the flick of a wrist, he would summon an assistant who would bring you an endless procession of tray upon tray of exquisitely designed jewellery: rings, chains, necklaces, bracelets, and earrings of every imaginable design, skilfully set against a background of dark blue velvet.

Time stands still, while you finger every piece of jewellery that takes your fancy, as the jeweller stands by patiently and unobtrusively watching your every move with hawk-like eyes. It is said that these bullion merchants are versed in the ancient Eastern art of deciphering body language, and that they can gauge a customer’s interest in any particular item. As soon as they sense such an interest in a particular item of jewellery, the tension eases. Smiles appear on the taut faces and Eastern hospitality exudes. A tray of refreshments materializes, and a deal is clinched. Gold smithery in Sea Street dates back to the early 19th century, to the period of British rule in Sri Lanka. when the craft was the monopoly of the Chetties who arrived from Southern India-hence the Sinhalese name of the street, Hetty Vidiya-which means “the street of the Chetties!

During the late 16th century, when the Dutch occupation of Sri Lanka was drawing to a close, South India experienced great political upheaval, with internal strife making additional inroads into the South Indian socio-political economy already upset by European nations seeking to ensnare the monopoly of commerce in India. Thus the Moghul power was in danger of collapse, and the Chetty merchants, along with South Indians of other castes, sought greener pastures.

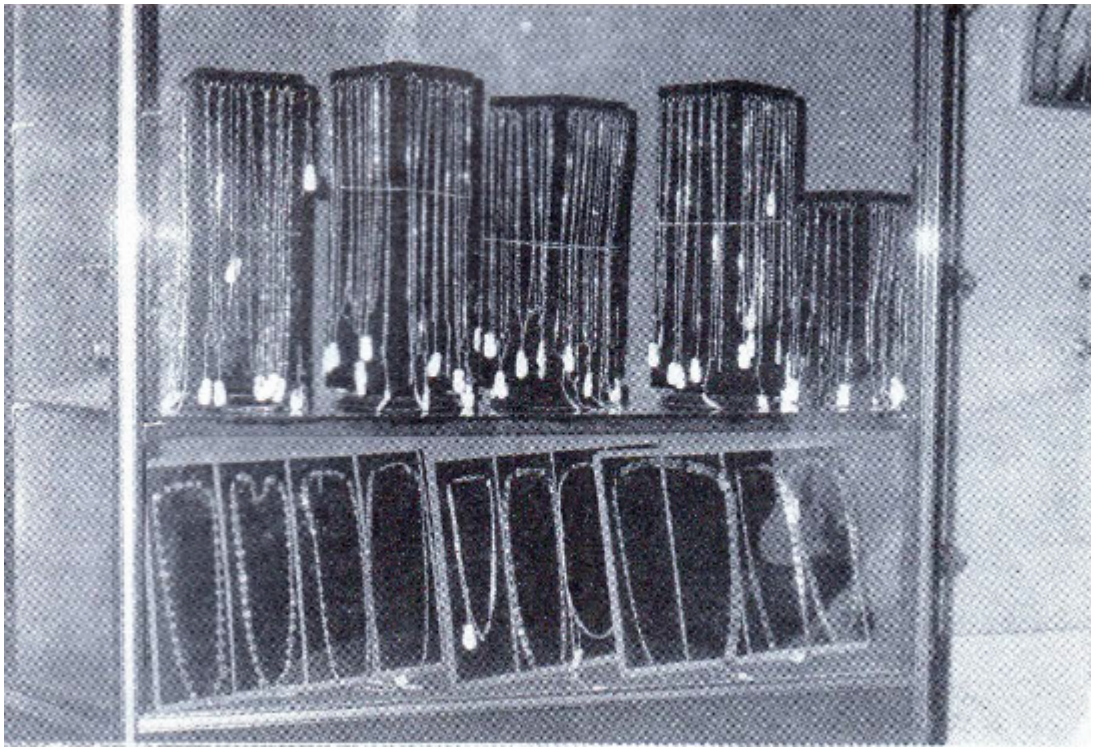
Many of these Chetty merchants had been employed by the fabulously wealthy Indian Maharajahs as their personal gold smiths, to turn out all their household requirements of gold jewellery. These Chetties, on coming to Sri Lanks, formed a colony, and in accordance with the system prevalent at the time, occupied the residential quarters allocated to each community.

In the case of the Chetties, these were in the vicinity of sea Street, in the old Pettah. Although this system was abolished by the constitutional changes in 1832, when Sri Lanka was made a Crown Colony by the British, the Chet ties still continued to practice their trade in this quarter. The name “Chetty” by which this community is known was originally applied to the trading castes and within the South Indian system falls under the caste known as vaisyas meaning those who ‘buy or sell’. This community is reputed for its sound business sense. The present Colombo Chetties are descendents of this race, who have intermingled with indigenous Sri Lankan

communities and now form an integral part of Sri Lanka.

Many of the original Chetties of Sea Street have since sold out to their Indian counterparts or to Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese who in turn carry on the trade, and some have even built minor gold empires today. The business is usually handed down from father to son.

Displaying a gold necklace to a prospective buyer.



Some of the 22-carat gold necklaces which are on display at a Sea Street jewellers shop.

The ancient lure of gold jewellery has been well recorded through the ages, and women from time immemorial have been known to give their eyeteeth for the. possession of an adornment in gold. More so it has been traditional in the east that no bride is given or taken in marriage without a dowry which includes some gold. Items of gold jewellery have been found in the ancient tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs, as well. Gold plays an important part in South Asian culture. The wealth and social status of a family in the East is reflected in the extent of the gold jewellery possessed by the womenfolk. In fact, most Sri Lankan women own at least one item of gold jewellery. When a marriage is arranged the first step usually taken is a trip to a reputed jeweller or goldsmith to place an order for the bridal jewellery, be it for the seven gold chains worn by the up country Sinhalese bride or the Thalikodi, the chain and gold belt worn by the Tamil or Muslim brides which take the place of the Western wedding ring. Easterners also regard gold as an investment which holds good even in times of inflation, and is readily realized for cash over the counter as and when the need arises. Indeed the bullion merchants of yore have left a legacy of fine craftsmanship. The craftsmen take much pride in their craft, skills having been handed down from father to son. Gold used in their craft is usually

obtained from the Central Bank in the form of sovereigns. There is considerable smuggling from India and the Middle East too.

These sovereigns are melted down, then hammered and moulded into designs using intricate instruments, or poured into moulds of various designs. All jewellery turned out in Sea Street as the craftsmen proudly point out, consists of no less than 22 carat gold and can either be made to order or picked of readymade from the many showcases.

Jewellery turned out ranges from heavy ornate traditional type pieces to delicate stone-studded beauties. There is always something to please the most discerning eye. Although Sea Street jewellers specialize in working with gold, many turn out silver jewellery on request as well. For a small sum they also perform the service of piercing ones ears or nose, a tradition still prevalent among women in Sri Lanka.

The price of gold all over the world seems to fluctuate, now steadily rising. A carat now costs Rs. 3,600 (USD 130) but whatever the cost, custom will never cease for gold is an inherent part of the Eastern and Sri Lankan culture. To the mind of the Westerner gold has always conjured up pictures of the mysterious East. It is just one of those golden mysteries you would discover on your first walk down Colombo’s Sea Street.