

SOCIO ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVE OF ARTISANAL GEM MINING OF SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka has many varieties, sizes of precious, and semiprecious stones, varying in size, globally known and used for more than 2500 years. These include high-value gemstones such as sapphire, ruby, cat's-eye, topaz, and beryl, as well as semiprecious gemstones such as garnet, moonstone, tourmaline, and feldspar. Mining of these varieties locally differs, and have been spread irregularly in the Vijayan Complex, Highland Group and Southwestern Group in Precambrian rocks. However, principal gem fields have been concentrated mainly in the Ratnapura District.

In Sri Lanka, artisanal gem mining is obvious and popular than the mechanical mining throughout the country. Before setting up of the State Gem Corporation (SGC) in 1972, gem mining, identification of gemstones, lapidary, buying and selling (gem business) were conducted by traditional skilled-workmen (artisans and labours). Until that time, the real importance of these sectors had not been realized. About 90 percent of the artisans and labours did that work in addition to work as cultivators. They did not have the knowledge to evaluate every gem, which they found and were controlled by crafty businesspersons. Often they (miners) did the work of gemming as hired labourers in mines belong to powerful families or businesspersons of the areas. They received a measly allowance each week for the mining. Sometimes when they found a valuable gem, they received a small bonus for it.

After the setting up of SGC, a great difference is observed in the values of gem exports. A striking feature here is that the exports of the private sector have always surpassed those of the SGC. With the policy of an open economy, which came into effect in 1978, the import-export trade became open. Due to this reason, private traders in the gem business appear to have reduced their contacts with the SGC and tended to carry on their business. These appear to have been greater opportunities for smuggling of gems. Regular detections by customs officers at airports and other points have borne this out. However, it is well known that smuggling of gems is an extremely well organized affair during the past 25 years period. Such activities caused to stop the receivable income to the SGC as well as to the government.

At the beginning, the Thais arrived in Sri Lanka in small numbers and there was no appreciable increase in prices of geuda stones. However, when they later began to come in large numbers better competition occurred. As a result, these stones (geuda) began to grow rapidly in price and finally reached a level of the prices offered for traditionally more valuable gems. Thai nationals who came to Sri Lanka to buy gems were the leading businesspersons, but the majority of those who moved to Ratnapura were not so wealthy. Furthermore, Thai nationals were beginners to the gem trade in Sri Lanka, once they took up residence at Ratnapura, they were able to impact on the gem industry in the country. Likewise, they began to visit the gem mining places out of the Ratnapura town, for e.g. Okkampitiya and Balangoda areas. As a result, a new class of young intermediaries began to buy gems with payment of ready cash to the miners and offered these in turn to the Thai nationals. This new class came mostly from among those who worked earlier in gem pits on a basis of daily payment or those with some formal education, but without job opportunities. As a result, these people have become newly rich in that they are now in possession of semi-luxurious houses and new motor vehicles.

All these aspects of gem industry show the socio-economic consequences. Accordingly, problems of land tenure, poverty, literacy and education, health problems and mining accident were inherited to labours who worked in gem pits with daily or weekly allowance. But the others, for e.g. powerful families (landowners), gem merchants at Beruwala and new class of young intermediaries were obtained many social and economic benefits. Similarly, the private sector recorded a gradual increase in the value of exports, but illegal operation of the gem trade is well backed by some organized groups. However, public awareness and further research are needed on socio-economic aspects as well as for the protection of the environment and health problems in the gem mining industry. Such awareness programmes can be undertaken by rural level societies, youth clubs and with the help of secondary school level students at Divisional Secretariat level in relevant areas.