

Historical Review on Herbal Trading in Sri Lanka, with Special Reference to Post-Colonial Era

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Sri Lanka possess remarkably rich flora with approximately about 3,000 species of vascular plants, over a quarter are endemic. The number of species used in traditional medicine is estimated to be between 550 and 700. An inscription discovered in King Nissankamalla's council chamber on the bound of Topawewa in Polonnaruwa states that the King granted certain immunities to the land owner on condition that, land owner pays yield interest to a hospital. The inscription states "The same land shall be rented to yield interest and one Pala (of dried ginger) should be given year after year as rent to the hospital founded by Dotivalakna. Should it not be possible to give the dried ginger a huna of gold should be given' Paranawithana 1934 - (Pala and Huna were ancient units of measurements).

Ayurvedic medicinal system was originated in India and it is said to be well-established in Sri Lanka by 500 BC. By the sixth century the Persians had settled in Sri Lanka in considerable numbers. It was described in texts that Sri Lanka had contact with China from third A. D. and China considered Sri Lanka as an important enterport centre where trans-shipment of various goods from east and the west took place. One of the Chinese text Tai Ping Yu Lan written by Yang tzu in the third century A. D. contains a briefing that "Shihtze (Sri Lanka) country produces Cinnabar, Mercury, Hsun-lun, Turmeric, Slorax, Eostus and perfumes". Different Sinhalese kings were also shown an interest towards establishing direct trade relations with outside world in medieval times. In the twelfth century the country's international trade share, increased and king Parakramabahu I, even set up a department called 'Antarangadhara'(The Department of Trade in the ancient period) in order to organize trade. Spices was one of the major requirement in Ayurveda and included almost all the herbs with 17 and 18 century observed Sri Lanka's position in the contemporary market, especially in the international trade of spices. These significant changes occurred largely due to policies of two European nations that captured Ceylon, was Portuguese. After realizing value of Ceylon as a trading point and the available resources they declared cinnamon as a monopoly in 1614. Unfortunately this policy was not correlatively followed and administered as certain Portuguese officials were engaged in this trade. It was said that 1500 Bahars (9380) valued cinnamon had been exported in 1630 per annum.

Key Words: Historical Review; Herbal Trading; Sri Lanka; Post-Colonial Era; Ayurvedic medicinal system

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