

A TREATISE ON GEMS

by

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From time immemorial, Sri Lanka had a reputation for possessing a wealth of precious stones and pearls. Lured by these riches, foreigners came here often on commercial ventures. Ratna-dvīpa (island of gems) was an old appellation for Sri Lanka. Hsuan Tsang in his *Buddhist Records of the Western World* gives an account of the history of this island and calls it Ratna-dvīpa. In pre-Christian inscriptions of Sri Lanka, the word *manikara* (lapidary) occurs often as a profession practised by persons who were wealthy enough to donate caves for Buddhist monks.

Garuda-Purāna speaks of *ratna-parīkṣā* (examination of gems) as one of the sixty-four kinds of arts. *Pūjāvaliya*, a Sinhala prose work of the 12th century, also refers to the same art. In later Sinhala works also there are similar references. Therefore it is clear that the technological processes pertaining to gems is of antiquarian origin. Expert knowledge relating to the art of the lapidary could have gathered up in the course of time and handed down from generation to generation and also put into writing as in the case of sculptors and painters. *Ratna-parīkṣāśāstra* is an old manuscript in the Colombo National Museum which is in corrupt Sanskrit with Tami words interspersed. It deals with the art of examination of gems. There is also a small treatise in Sinhala in print which has, as its title *Ratna-Parīkṣaka-śāstraya*. The date of the publication is not given but from the state of the document it is possible to surmise that it was printed not later than forty or fifty years ago. However, it speaks of gems found in Sri Lanka, their characteristics and the manner by which they may be sorted out. It is not a comprehensive work and this article is written to focus the attention of scholars who may be interested in this field of study.

The chronicles of Sri Lanka, namely *Mahāvamsa*, *Cūlavamsa* and *Dīpavamsa* refer to numerous kinds of gems and pearls which are found in abundance in this country. Eight kinds of pearls are referred to. They are horse-pearl, elephant-pearl, wagon-pearl, myrobalan-pearl, bracelet pearl, ring-pearl, kakuda-fruit-pearl and common pearl. Sapphires, beryls and rubies were products of this land. There is a reference to four splendid gems which had formed in size like to a small grindstone, in colour like flax-flowers, radiantly beautiful. With regard to minerals, there are references to gold, silver, copper, iron, rock crystal, yellow orpiment, cinnabar, red arsenic, vermillion, corals and shells. Nine kinds of precious stones are sometimes referred to. There was also a trade in gems as attested by a reference to a ship carrying precious stones to foreign lands, in order to increase the revenue of the country.

The document named *Ratna-parīkṣakaśāstraya* referred to earlier of which the contents will be given in the sequel, deals with nine kinds of gems and their respective varieties. They are rubies, diamonds, pearls, emeralds, sapphires, *lapis lazuli*, topaz, corals and yellow gems (*gomedā*). Rubies are again divided into five varieties. The