



## AN ETHNOGRAPHICAL STUDY ON RIVER GEM MINING IN RATHNAPURA DISTRICT SRI LANKA

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Sri Lanka is known as the **Jewel Box** of the Indian Ocean, Plethora of gem species and varieties found in the country has been the reason for it from the very early times. The discussions on Sri Lankan gems can be seen in early literature such as Mahabharata, Arthashastra, Ptolemy, Kosmas, Fahian, Marco polo, Iban Battuta's peregrination records. Rathnapura, also known as the "town of gem" is the heart of the Sri Lankan gems. Land gemming was the famous method for gemming from the ancient time. Later miners have discovered that valuable and precious gems are lying in the beds of the rivers and have introduced novel methods for gemming in rivers. Traditional river gem mining; *adhum pathal*, *adina pathal* or *gange pathal* is particular to Rathnapura District and have hundreds of years of history. Main objective of this research was to discover the traditional river gem mining techniques and the extent of machinery replacement on the traditional ways of gemming life. Participant observation and in-depth interviews were done to gather data on traditional river gemming industry between the periods of January to May 2015. Miners should obtain permission from the government for river gemming and also parts of the river were put up for auction and miners have to bargain to get a part of the river for gemming. Most of the Rathnapura District river miners do not have licence; regardless of this they continue their gemming in many of the rivers and streams in Rathnapura District. River gemming starts with worshipping and the vow made to the Katharagama deity for the protection as well as for finding gems. In traditional method of river gemming first they select a portion of a river or stream and make a scaffold across the river. Then placed tropical almond (Kottamba) or arecanut stems on the scaffold faced to the upside of the river. Miners stand on these stems while unearthing minerals from the river bed in to the river surface called *hiti adiya* using a mamotee. A long shaft made of *hora* tree (*Dipteroacarpus zelanicus*) was attached to the mamotee, the length of the shaft (10ft. to 50ft) depend on the depth of the *illam* (vein of mineral ore). They use *Paththa* (stake) and *suraya* (motor made from a used vehicle accelerator that joined to a wooden stem) to loosen the *illam*. Now a days "The Sucker machine" has replaced the above mentioned traditional gemming system. However it is legally prohibited due to the large scale environmental damage. At present the society's traditional ways of gemming was replaced by machines and new technologies. There is a trend in young generation to use machines for easiness in the operation and disregard the traditional ways which cause less damage to the environment than the new technology. Thus these traditional gemming systems should be studied in detail and preserved before it becomes completely machinized and traditional knowledge of the miners can be used to make new eco-friendly machines.

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