
Editorial

Cultural Traits and Traditions in the Use of Cosmetics

The main focus of this number of Vidurava is on the use of cosmetics, perfumes and detergents in Sri Lanka. The authors of the articles have taken great pains to describe in detail all aspects concerning the formulation, production, marketing and application of the range of products that fall under cosmetics, perfumes and detergents. The likely pitfalls as well as the pros and cons in the regular use of these products have also been explained, and hence this vital information deserves the widest possible publicity. The gamut of goods and services delivered or provided through these products appears almost incredible. It is almost certain that a majority of the user clients of these products are ignorant of the good, bad and worst scenarios in the regular application of these substances.

Cosmetics and perfumes had been popular, and in common use during the great ancient civilizations of the Middle and West Asian countries. Sri Lanka though located in close proximity to the ancient shipping lanes of the Eastern Seaboard, and had entertained trans-continental trade, and even offered trans-shipment facilities to West Asian visitors from around 250 BC, does not seem to have been influenced by the glamour, or the flamboyance of this West Asian culture. The Island nation was also known to have established diplomatic relations and exchanged information, gifts and pleasantries way back in the First Century AD with the Roman Emperor Claudius Ceasar (41 – 54 AD). However, there are hardly any references

to the use of cosmetics by our ancestors in the historical and literary works of classical Western writers. Thus despite such inter-relationships and personal interactions with perpetual users of cosmetics, Sri Lankans do not seem to have been attracted or cherished this art in ancient times. Nevertheless, the expressions of beauty and glamour of ‘noble women’ of ancient Sri Lanka appear to have been displayed through the use of exquisitely designed ornaments and jewellery made of gold, silver, tortoise shell and occasionally ivory. Classical historians such as Robert Knox (1681), Robert Percival (1803) and Charles Sirr (1850) have described in great detail the attire and apparel worn by all classes of men and women. The only reference to the use of a cosmetic is the anointing of the hair with coconut oil to bring its sheen and lustre to the fore. However, D.M.A. Jayaweera (1985), in his treatise titled ‘Medicinal Plants Used in Ceylon’ published in 5 parts, mentions *Suduhandun* (sandalwood), *Lapnaran* (Citron), *Agaru* (Aloes wood), *Kalu-duru* (black cumin), *Sevendera* (Khus-khus), and *Hinguru-piyali*, cultivated in Sri Lanka for medicinal purposes, as also being used as ingredients of local perfumes. Thus there appears to have been a distinct cultural trait and tradition amongst the womenfolk of ancient, medieval, and the early colonial periods of Sri Lanka in respect of the use high profile cosmetics, a feature that had apparently disappeared in the late colonial era, when the use of commercially produced cosmetics, perfumes and detergents had begun to spread throughout the country.

M. Asoka T. De Silva