

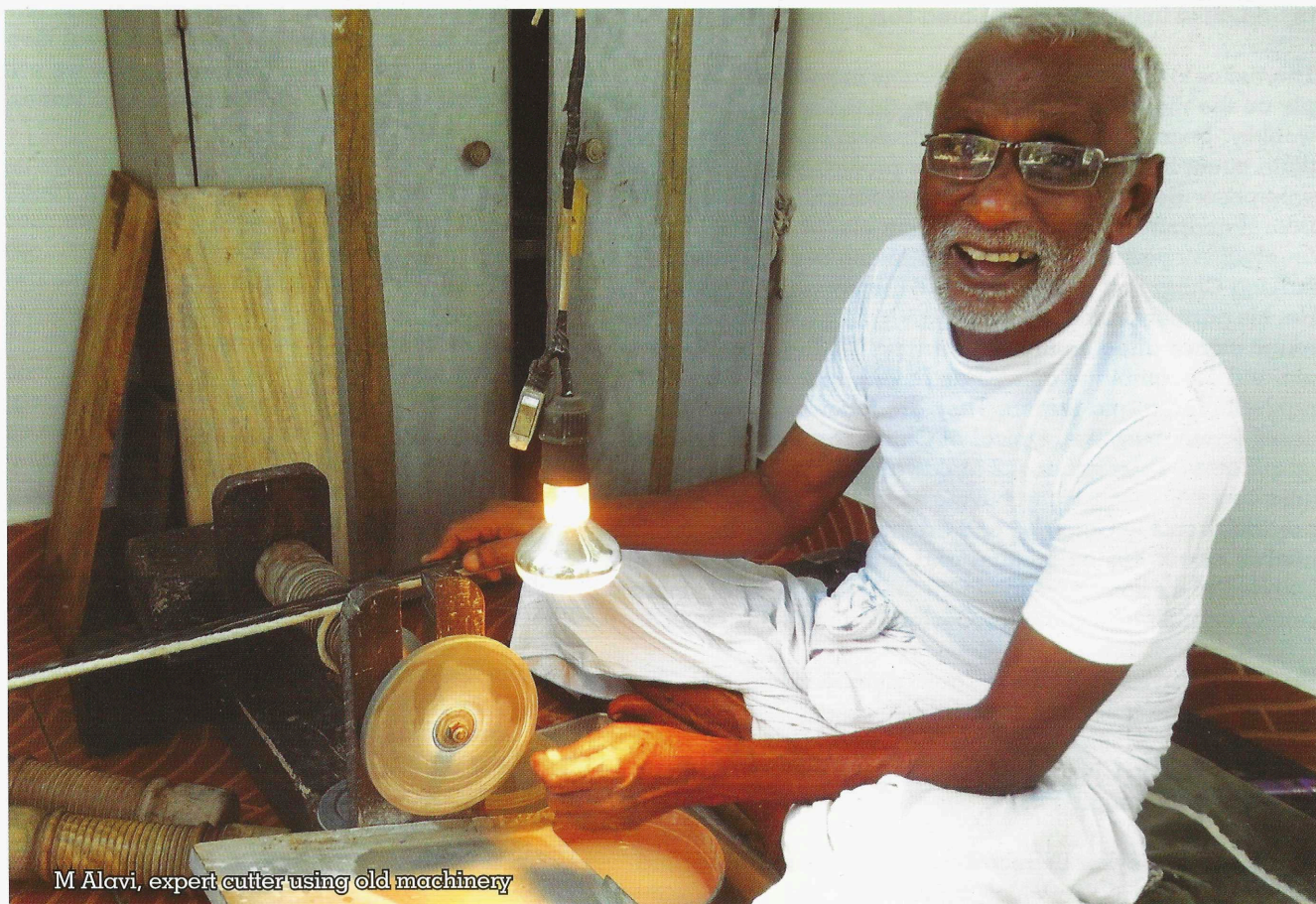
Statistics record remittances by Sri Lankans working overseas; tourism; and the export of tea and garments as major foreign exchange earners for Sri Lanka. But behind Beruwala, on Sri Lanka's west coast, inland from the Galle Road, is a little known enclave called China Fort that generates masses of foreign exchange through its export (and import and re-export) of gem stones.

I discovered when I visited there recently that the gem trade of China Fort not only helps Sri Lankans but also assists the development of many African nations. And, of course, gems from Sri Lanka are crucial to the creation of jewellery masterpieces which sell for millions of dollars to the delight of international investors and collectors.

China Fort today has boomed because of the new direction the island's gem trade has taken. For centuries, foreign buyers came to Sri Lanka to buy gems, sourcing them at the mining centre of Ratnapura or from the gem cutters and polishers of Galle and Beruwala. The story is told of a China Fort gem merchant flying business class who found himself sitting next to a US scientist. They got talking and the scientist told the gem merchant of satellite pictures that revealed lots of gem-bearing strata in Africa.



This resulted in the merchants of China Fort looking beyond Ratnapura for rough stones to be cut and polished as precious gems. The adventurous ones braved great hardships to track down gem mines in Africa where they sourced rough stones. It is a risky business even today, not just because of the perils of Africa, but also because even the most experienced of gem dealers is never sure if the rough stone he is buying will yield a perfect gem.



M Alavi, expert cutter using old machinery