

# HARVESTING 'TRUE CINNAMON'

## The story of the Ceylon spice

Part 2

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**W**hen the Coronavirus pandemic began, most resident cinnamon peelers left for their homes during the months-long lockdowns. Runage had to shuffle his staff around to find labour; women from the factory were relocated to the estate to peel cinnamon.

Dayani Malkanthi, 44, worked at the packing department at the factory, but a few months ago when Sri Lanka went back into lockdown to battle a new wave of Covid, she came to the estate.

"I'm really slow. It's a very hard job," says Malkanthi, giving a faint smile while scraping the outer bark of a cinnamon branch. "I'm still learning."

Once done, Malkanthi is careful to avoid any damage to the inner cinnamon bark. While experienced peelers like Piyathilake peel about five kilos a day, Malkanthi can produce only about 3 kilos. She is not happy here and wants to relocate to the factory. "Take us back to the factory," she says to the visiting officer Lakshith.

"Let's see. We are trying to find skilled peelers," says Lakshith, walking past Malkanthi. He cannot make any promises. While the company struggles to find skilled labourers, Coronavirus is another battle they have to tackle.

**Of colonial oppression**  
Cinnamon was widely consumed as early as 3000 BC. The ancient world considered it a luxurious spice. For ancient Egyptians, cinnamon was a status symbol, which they also used in perfumes. The Greeks considered it a medicine. Sinhalese literature of the 10th century mentions that the island's cinnamon was highly valued. In the 13th century, Sinhalese kings established economic ties with Egypt to export it. Historian Nirmal Ranjith Dewasiri says that from the beginning of the 10th century, Arab merchants traded Sri Lanka's cinnamon to Europe along with other spices; the island became an important hub in the Indian Ocean trade.

In ancient Sri Lanka, the king was considered the guardian of the land. For cultivating the land, people had to perform a service to him. Historically, these tasks were assigned to certain castes. Cinnamon peeling was reserved for the Salagama community, who were originally weavers and believed to be the descendants of post-13th century South Indian migrants.

Cinnamon grew in the wild in Sri Lanka. Therefore, for months of the year, the head of the household would set off to the jungles to produce a certain amount of cinnamon for the king, in return for the land they cultivated.

"When the Portuguese colonisers came here in the early 16th century, they took advantage of this ancient land tenure system," says Dewasiri. A paper by historian M.U. de Silva explains that a decree from Goa (then Portuguese India) declared the Salagama community to be descendants of captured slaves in order to exploit them.

Previously, cinnamon peeling was reserved for the head of the household in a Salagama family, but under Portuguese rule, boys as young as 12 had to peel cinnamon and deliver a certain amount of it. The colonisers increased this amount according to age and one's physical condition. By the end of the 17th century, "the original weavers, now turned peelers, had to stay in the woods for more than eight months of the year," writes M.U. de Silva.

Then in 1658, the Dutch (allied with the Kandyan kingdom in Sri Lanka) took control of Sri Lanka's coastal belt after a series of battles with the Portuguese, and established a cinnamon monopoly by exploiting the Salagama community to supply the spice to meet the growing demand of the European market.

Governor Rijckloff van Goens Jr, ruling from 1675 to 1680, referred to cinnamon as the "bride around whom all of us danced." There were only a small number of peelers left in the coastal areas by then, Dewasiri explains. "Most people lost their lives because of battles against the colonial invasions and various diseases. Some of them had gone to the central hills of Sri Lanka to escape their fate," says Dewasiri. "So there was more burden on the individual peeler."

"When you marry a low-caste person, you automatically become part of that lower caste. So some Salagama people would marry into a lower caste to escape the burden on them," says Dewasiri. "But the Dutch noticed that. So they made a new



Nimali Wijenayake packs cinnamon at the Carlton estate packing department, where she has worked for last eight years.

### ⊗ BEWARE !! ⊗

Several Popular brands have started selling Cassia under the name of Ceylon / Sri Lankan True Cinnamon to imitate us.



<<CASSIA>>  
If their product looks like these, then it's Cassia.

### CINNAMON>>

This is what True / Ceylon Cinnamon looks like. Google: Cassia vs Cinnamon or H1 Ceylon Cinnamon

It is easy to fall for the inferior cassia variety.



Ceylon cinnamon, native to Sri Lanka, often triumphs as the pure, 'true' cinnamon.



Before the Coronavirus pandemic, tourists swarmed Sarath de Silva's house for an 'authentic' cinnamon peeling experience.

law. Even if you marry a low-caste person, you are still a cinnamon peeler. So there was no escape."

Local headmen supervised the cinnamon peelers; they were paid by the Dutch according to the number of peelers they provided. According to M.U. de Silva, the Dutch forced "a person who could stand up and walk with the help of a stick" to peel cinnamon. Those who attempted to flee were "tied and tortured like high criminals to be placed in stocks and sent to Colombo for trial. And seldom they escaped logging and other punishments in Colombo," he adds.

When cinnamon trees dwindled in the jungles because of excessive peeling, the Dutch took measures to cultivate cinnamon. By 1794, there were 609 million cinnamon trees in southwest Sri Lanka. "By the end of the Dutch rule, there were massive commercial plantations of cinnamon along the coast. When the British occupied the island in 1815, other cash crops like coffee and tea became more important," explains Dewasiri, referring to Dutch-era plantations like Cinnamon Gardens in Colombo. Today, there is hardly a cinnamon tree left in the area, which is now an



Quills and powder.

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Cinnamon quills are cut and packed before exporting.

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upmarket neighbourhood with residential houses, boutiques and cafes.

Despite these colonial-era changes, some generational labourers like Piyathilake are still peeling cinnamon. During their rule, Dutch colonisers also harnessed the services of other castes to meet their demands.

One of those was the Hakuru caste, who were traditional jaggery makers. Piyathilake belongs to the Hakuru community in Elpitiya, a region famous for palm jaggery. But as far as his memory runs, his family never made jaggery. "Cinnamon was the only thing we knew," says Piyathilake, trying to recall the childhood stories he heard from his grandparents. "I don't know how our ancestors began peeling cinnamon. Maybe we had so much cinnamon growing in the land."

As for Runage, cinnamon is still tied to the lives of thousands of people in the south of Sri Lanka. In his company alone, there are about 9,000 registered farmers and peelers; more than 40,000 members of their families depend on the cinnamon industry for their income.

Cinnamon also occupies a place in the tourism industry today. Sarath de Silva, 70, lives on a small island named Ganduwa in Koggala Lake, roughly an hour's drive and a 20-minute boat ride from the Runage family estate. Cinnamon trees grow in the wild here, and there are five houses in total.

Before the Coronavirus pandemic, many local and foreign tourists flocked to Ganduwa. De Silva peeled cinnamon as tourists snapped pictures; he then treated them to a cup of cinnamon-infused black tea. In return, most visitors would buy small packets of cinnamon quills, cinnamon powder and one-ounce (about 30ml) glass bottles of cinnamon oil. Each costs Rs. 400.

For now, the pandemic has completely halted de Silva's means of earning an income, but he is hopeful that tourists will return when the travel restrictions are relaxed.

De Silva is not the only one in the cinnamon tourism business. As foreign arrivals started increasing, more and more cinnamon growers organised tours for visitors. There were luxury tours like The Cinnamon

Experience, where visitors can walk through a large estate and receive hands-on experience peeling cinnamon; tourists could also prepare and taste cinnamon-scented Sri Lankan curries.

The cassia challenge  
While the Runage family has been successful in building a lucrative cinnamon business, their biggest challenge in the international trade has been cassia that masquerades as Ceylon cinnamon in the market.

"When you walk to Walmart or Costco in America, everything is labelled cinnamon. You can't find what cassia is or what Ceylon cinnamon is," explains Runage. "That's a big challenge because cassia is cheap and people tend to buy it."

Research shows that cassia also contains high levels of coumarin that may cause liver damage if one consumes it in large quantities. It is a reason why Ceylon cinnamon is also promoted as the healthier option. But Runage says that most people are not aware of it. While European countries use cinnamon in their food, there is little demand from the continent for Ceylon cinnamon.

"European buyers like to buy products from the country of origin. That leads us to our next problem," says Runage. "To prove that Ceylon cinnamon comes from Sri Lanka, we need to acquire the GI or 'geographical indication' for Ceylon cinnamon."

In 2020, Sri Lanka applied for the GI tag for Ceylon cinnamon. During the process, Madagascar objected. "The objection has been made by the Madagascar authorities on the grounds that 'Ceylon cinnamon' is not a variety, and they too grow Ceylon cinnamon," J.M. Seneviratne, who is the Economics Research Unit director of Sri Lanka's Department of Export Agriculture, said.

"I didn't take them to a lab to test, but I saw our cinnamon growing in Madagascar a couple of years ago when I went there," says Runage. It is thought that sailors brought cinnamon to Madagascar around the 17th century. "They don't use our traditional methods of peeling. So Ceylon cinnamon is very much our unique product. But unless we have the GI tag, we can't go somewhere else and promote it as ours. No one will believe us."

What the future holds  
Runage believes that Government intervention and a proper system to regulate the cinnamon industry is essential for the future. "No matter how much we make, businesses like us cannot fight for the GI tag. That's up to the governments."

For now, Runage exports most of the cinnamon product to Latin American countries like Mexico, Guatemala and Peru. "We can get more buyers from South American countries, but they are quite far away. So if I travel there, I would want to visit a few countries at once," explains Runage. "You would wonder why I can't do that? Let me tell you. There's an issue. I want to visit Peru as a businessman, I have to go to the embassy in New Delhi to get a visa. Once I get it and apply for a visa to Guatemala, my Peru visa has already expired." And this is where Runage needs government assistance - bilateral agreements between countries so businessmen like him can explore more opportunities.

Despite these challenges, the company continues to expand, exporting cinnamon quills and powder across the globe, and also producing and selling cinnamon oil - both leaf oil, which is used for perfumes, and bark oil, favoured by culinary experts. Currently, organic cinnamon accounts for only one to three percent of the company's whole production, but Runage is hoping to expand soon.

Back in the estate, Piyathilake attends to his work peeling organically grown cinnamon and binding new quills for drying. There is a way to identify good cinnamon in the local market, he says. "If you see beautiful gold coloured cinnamon, never buy them. It looks beautiful, but it's a lie.

"They are deceiving you. It's sprayed with sulphur so they look pretty to the eye."

Despite his long, tiring days at work, he is proud of being part of a generational craft that has put a roof over his family's heads for centuries. "You have to make these cinnamon quills look beautiful without any cuts or wounds," he says smiling, "like the same way you would dress a new bride." (Concluded) (A Jazera)