

# A Commercial Dialogue between North India and Sri Lanka in Ancient Period



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## Abstract

The work here presented is an attempt to analysis the trade and commercial relation of Sri Lanka especially with North India. Sri Lanka's position in the Indian Ocean and close proximity to the Indian subcontinent gave her a chance to make its first every type of relation with India. Probably these trade relations are datable to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.

This work is here divided in paragraphs of Trade and natural products, Elephant and Horse trade, textile and others, Archaeological evidences and coins and routes for the easy study of Sri Lanka's trade articles. We can say that the abundance of gems and spices was the chief reason for the traders from all over the world were drawn here. Sri Lanka exported high quality pearls, gems, tortoise shells, spices such as cloves and other valuable woods and textiles as her main products from pre-Christian times. Horses and elephant trade in Sri Lanka which was another important import export item. Many other archaeological evidences as a seal, remains of domesticated horses were found from many sights. The third topic will discuss the requirement of textiles in both countries with the help of literary evidences. In the next paragraph the archaeological material of the various sites of Sri Lanka confirms North Indian contacts with Sri Lanka. We have number of archaeological evidences of the earliest and strongest ceramic trade from the island. Coins discovered in Sri Lanka also attested information of the trade pattern. These coins came in the second half of the third century. B.C. known as Puranas', or the punch marked coins imported from North India. Many coins of the ancient north Indian dynasties so far attested in the island.

The last paragraph is dedicated to the trade routes. Historical evidences provide information that there were many flourished trade routes were in use which went from India to Sri Lanka also vice versa. So this paper is an effort to understand the readers the pattern of trade between these two countries.

**Keywords:** Vedddhas, Yakkhinis, Tissa, Tamraparni, Dutthagamini

## Introduction

The shape of Sri Lanka is like a pearl dropped from South India and settled down in the Indian Ocean. Its position in the Indian Ocean and close proximity to the Indian subcontinent gave her a chance to have its first every type of relation with India. Historical sources both eastern and western narrate the role of Sri Lanka as an important entrepot in the long distance trade of the Indian Ocean linking the shores of East Africa, South West Asia, South Asia, and Far East. The available literary and archaeological artifacts found at different important places of Sri Lanka suggest that Sri Lanka's contact with India has been more than any other country. Historians have not been able to pinpoint the actual date of establishment of trade relation between the two countries. Probably the trade relation between North India and Sri Lanka are datable to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. It is surmised that the early historic period of Sri Lanka was more closely linked with North India than with the South.

We must first however premise a few observations on the nature, and production of this island in order thereby illustrate the peculiarities of its commercial history. The northern states of earlier period of India attained a higher splendored of material culture than that of the Tamils and consequently there would have been a ready market for the luxury goods of Sri Lanka in North India than in the South.<sup>(1)</sup>

Hence, this paper is an effort to explore the trade and commercial relation between North India and Sri Lanka through literary, archaeological and numismatic evidences.

### Aim of the Study

From the remote past Sri Lanka's property of gems and its production attracted traders and many visitors. Buddhism also played an important role in this field. That's why Sri Lanka became a topic of interest for every researcher. First Aryan colonizer went to the island then Buddhism reached there and Buddhism show path to the traders and visitors. Sri Lanka's geographical situation and its natural wealth also give it a different recognition. This is the main reason that makes this study more relevant. In the past many studies already had been focused on Sri Lanka and on its natural wealth. But this is the first attempt when Sri Lanka's every trade article is present here step by step with special reference to north India. The aim of this study is to make this article more relevant to the beginners and for all those readers who are taking interest in the study of Sri Lanka and India.

### Trade of Natural Products (Pearls, Gems, Precious Stones etc.)

Sri Lanka, the island known as the pearl of the India Ocean lives up to its nickname as a hotbed for a variety of gems. Sri Lanka is home of 40 varieties of gems out of 85 varieties available in the whole world. We can say that the abundance of gems and spices was the chief reason for the traders from all over the world were drawn here. Native *Veddhas*, bathing in smooth flowing streams, noticed coloured pebbles scattered in sandy bottoms. It was not until 500 B.C. that conquering Buddhists from northern India also discovered gems in the rivers and began to set rough stones into crude jewellery. Several works attested that Sri Lanka exported high quality pearls, gems, tortoise shells, spices such as cloves, pepper and cinnamon, incense and other valuable woods and textiles as her main products from pre-Christian times. <sup>(2)</sup> The *Mahaniddesa*, contains a stock list of places visited by Indian merchants, *Tambapanni* was one of them. <sup>(3)</sup> Ramayana calls it *resplendent land* <sup>(4)</sup> According to *Mahabharata*, Vibhisana, a Sri Lankan king sent gems, pearls and high quality and royal leather as tribute to Yudhisthira. <sup>(5)</sup> Probably the history of Sri Lankan pearls industry stretched to the period of King Vijaya, the first Aryan colonizer to Sri Lanka from North India about the 5<sup>th</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> century B.C. *Divyavadana* mentions that Vijaya belonged to a merchant's family of north India. <sup>(6)</sup> One of the earliest example of the commercial intercourse between the two countries is mentioned in *Valhass Jataka*, which says "before the Aryan migration to this country, *Yakkhinis*, <sup>(7)</sup> often wrecked the ships of the merchants on the coast between kalyani, and Nagadipa (Jaffna peninsula). On one occasion *yakkhini* took a chief merchant for her husband. <sup>(8)</sup>

The *Mahavamsa*, reports that Devanampiya Tissa sent Asoka various types of precious stones such as sapphire (*indanila*), cat's eye (*veluriya*), ruby (*lohitanika*) etc. as gifts. <sup>(9)</sup> It was confessed that those precious stones of Sri Lanka were not available in India. (*ratnani idisani ettha nathi*). <sup>(10)</sup> This shows that three kinds of gems were considered the most valuable of all. There was a group of seven gems (*sattaratana*), which were less valuable than the

former group. *Mahavamsa* refers eight varieties of pearls surprisingly found on seashore at Anuradhapura. These were horse pearls, (*hayamutta*), Elephant pearls, (*gajamutta*), waggon pearls, (*rathamutta*), myrobalan pearls (*amalakamutta*) bracelet pearls (*valaymutta*), ring pearls, (*angulivethakamutta*), fruit pearls (*kakudhaphalamutta*) and common pearl (*pakatikamutta*). <sup>(11)</sup> This description shows people of that time had a fair knowledge of various types of pearls. The words of *manikara* (jeweller) and *manikargama* (village of jewellers) show that Sri Lanka produced gems in abundance and people were busy in gem trade. *Mahavamsa* reports how Dutthagamini decorated the assembly hall of Lohapasada with pearls. <sup>(12)</sup> Kautilya indicates that there was commercial relationship between north India and Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is mentioned as *Tamraparni* and a source of gems <sup>(13)</sup> in the Arthasastra <sup>(14)</sup>. It refers particularly two kinds of pearls namely the *panyakabata* and the *Tamraparnika* gems and aloe wood or *aguru*. <sup>(15)</sup>

Varahamihir mentions Sri Lanka for its goods pearls oysters in his *Brihat samhita*. *Brihat samhita* states that sesame was used for the fertility of the soil <sup>(16)</sup> and ascortic remedies also. <sup>(17)</sup> Besides it *Sukranitisar* is of the opinion that the people of Sri Lanka were skilled in making artificial pearls like the pearls of the Palk strait and the Persian Gulf. According to Sukracharya pearls grow in fishes, snakes, couches, hoga, bamboos clouds, and shell of the sea, the greatest amount is said to come from shells. *Fa-hien* says, "Sri Lanka and the adjoining islands produce pearls and precious stones and manigem is also found a district where the king placed a guard and claimed as royal share three out of every ten". <sup>(18)</sup> Literary and archaeological sources indicate that Guptas established well-developed political and commercial relations with Sri Lanka. During this period Topaz and glasses were imported from Sri Lanka <sup>(19)</sup> and Sri Lanka receives aloes, sandalwood, silk, etc. products from east of cape comorine. From Sindhu, they received musk, castor oil, spikenard, copper and sesame <sup>(20)</sup> and then sent to the foreign countries. Sri Lanka imported and exported its material to the Indian markets also. Hence, it was an important centre of trade. The *Garuda Purana* <sup>(21)</sup> mentions the blue stones found on the sea coast of Sri Lanka. India bought pearls, silver and cloths from Sri Lanka. The *Ratnavali*, a popular sanskrit play attributed to Sri Harsha has a reference to a merchant from Kausambi who was returning from Sri Lanka. <sup>(22)</sup> Huien-Tsang refers Sri Lanka as *Ratnadipa*. <sup>(23)</sup>

It may, therefore, be inferred that precious stones played an important role in the country's trade with north India. Still today, Ratnapur (singhalese for gem town) lies about 100 KM. south east of Colombo, is a chief mining region has produced an incredible variety of gemstones. Sapphire, Topaz, zircon, tourmaline, chrysoberyl, cat's eye etc found from Ratnadipa are outstanding in comparison with other regions. Except it Pelmadulla, mine was in operation about 15 KM. west of Ratnapur is also produced sapphires. The earliest records for the mining of

rubies, locally known as "rathu kata", was said to be based in Ratnapur and goes back to more than 2500, years back. Legends have it that at that time, the Sri Lanka's belief was that the intense red colouration was given to the ruby when the blood of their demonic king Ravana was spilt. They believed that after his demise he was set into the gemstone; hence, ruby's deep colouration. So as the home of variety of gems this place became a true *Mecca* for the serious gem collector.

#### **Elephant and Horse Trade**

According to Megasthenes besides pearls and gems Sri Lankans exported elephants to North India as early as the 300 B.C. They were sent to the king of Kalinga by the boats specially constructed for this purpose.<sup>(24)</sup> On the other hand we have some evidences that India exported elephants. Not only elephants but also various ivory goods were also sent to Sri Lanka. The village named "Dantakarkutumbika", or called "Dantkargama" was related with ivory carvers. Mahavamsa states that Mahasena's younger brother Jetthatissa was an expert in the art of ivory carving. So it is clear that elephants as well as ivory and ivory wares were among the exported items.

Horses were not bred locally but they were imported by Sri Lanka from foreign countries. In this matter they have to rely on Indians and Persians. "Saindhava" horses<sup>(25)</sup> are mentioned in Rigveda. This suggests that this breed originally brought from the Indus (Sindhu valley). South India was not known for the horse trade. Apparently the Tamils of South India imported horses from Arabia and Persia and sold them to the king and nobles of Sri Lanka and the kings of Sri Lanka used to buy them exempting custom duties. Moreover, the kings of Sri Lanka spent more on the elephants and horses coming from the Indian markets. The evidences of horse trade from North India to Sri Lanka could be found from a seal that is discovered at Chandraketugarh; a port situated on the eastern coast of India. Periplus identifies it as a famous port.<sup>(26)</sup> This seal depicts "a horse in a ship". In relation to the consignment of horses there is also mention in Pattinappalai, the early Tamil text, of the import of horses from across the sea at Kaverippattinam port. If we corroborate the literary evidences to archaeological evidences; we could find that probably horses brought from north west of India, were shipped from Chandraketugarh to various ports on the east coast of India, South India and to Sri Lanka.<sup>(27)</sup> Remains of domesticated horses were found in the proto historic levels at Anuradhapura and inscription dated to the first century B.C. mentions the use of horses.

#### **Textiles and others**

India was another source for Sri Lanka's requirement of textiles. Here too the cloth imported may have been luxury varieties for the upper classes. Kasi shawls are mentioned in the Guttala kavya and Gujrata cloth in the Paravi sandesa.<sup>(28)</sup> Cambay exported to Sri Lanka a special variety of cloth. The Mahabharata mentions that printed cloth was obtained from Sri Lanka. It shows that advanced textiles industry was flourishing in Sri Lanka. Tirthakalpa states a merchant who exported cloths to

Bharukaccha (Baroch) by ships.<sup>(29)</sup> Rajatarangini mentions a cloth manufacturer in Sri Lanka. When Dutthagamini, the famous king of Sri Lanka was about to die, his deep desire was to see the complete construction of Mahathupa, then Sadhatissa covered the Thupa with the white cloth and showed it to Dutthagamini. Vaidurya, a tortoise shell, a variety of spices as ginger, turmeric, pepper, coconut and aeronaut were other exported wares. From Sindhu came the musk and castor oil and spikenard. The musk and spikenard were evidently products of the hills taken down the Indus and exported from the ports near its mouth.<sup>(30)</sup> The Periplus states Sri Lanka produced muslins.<sup>(31)</sup> These references reflect the trade conditions of that time.

#### **Archaeological Artifacts**

After literary evidences let us look at the archaeological material of the various sites of Sri Lanka that confirms North Indian contacts with Sri Lanka. During proto historic period an obvious evidence of foreign objects are the teeth and bones of horses imported from north India or even further distances. The presence of the horse teeth and bones at Anuradhapura from the proto historic period indicates an earlier horse trade, which are not indigenous to Sri Lanka. Horses are traditionally imported from Sindh, Oman and from Faras in Persia.<sup>(32)</sup>

We have archaeological evidences of the earliest and strongest ceramic trade contacts with "greater India" until about 600A.D. North Indian contacts are noticeable from the end of the proto-historic through the whole of early historic and middle historic periods through the evidences of the plain Gray Ware, the NBP, latter Indo-Sasanian Jetavana vase, Red polished Ware and related red polished fabrics and the red painted white fabrics.<sup>(33)</sup> Thus, during the early historic period, many of the finest imported ceramics in Sri Lanka were North Indian. By the sixth century A.D., the ties with North India appears to have diminished considerably, but some North Indian contacts seem to continue in a reduced manner, perhaps it is only that their earlier visibility is swamped under the greatly increased volume of other ceramics from the East and West.<sup>(34)</sup> The second part of the early historic period of Sri Lanka begins with the introduction of Buddhism by Thera Mahinda, during the reign of Devanampiya Tissa (c.250-210 B.C.) it was from this period onwards that close political, cultural and commercial relationships were first established with North India. The earliest imported ceramic type identified so far in Sri Lanka is the plain gray ware from the basal early historic of the Anuradhapura citadle (600-500 B.C.) in north India, this ceramic is associated with PGW at sites in the Doab.<sup>(35)</sup> Like in India the plain gray ware strata are followed by strata containing Northern Black polished ware (N.B.P.)<sup>(36)</sup> likewise most of the finest imported ceramics of this period found in Sri Lanka were from India. The finding of carnelian and Lapis lazuli beads and intaglios, not only at Mantai and Anuradhapura, but also from recent excavation at Ridiyagama, is of greatest significance, because both categories of stones were certainly imported to the island from

north India and Afghanistan. As we know carnelian belonging to the chalcedony group is not found in Sri Lanka and was certainly imported from Gujarat, where according to the archaeological evidence it was produced in Gujarat without interruption from the early historic period. <sup>(38)</sup> The author of the *Periplus* mentions on three occasions that carnelian stone were exported from Barygaza. <sup>(39)</sup>

So these evidences suggest that the presence of early historic Black and red Ware and North Indian carnelian beads both at Ridiyagama and at the Megalithic cemetery of Ibbankatuwa is not a matter of surprise. The most interesting discovery in this respect is a carnelian blank. Another carnelian intaglio of the same dimensions depicting a figure holding a flower is found at Katargama <sup>(40)</sup> and the same type of carnelian blanks are found in the recent excavation at

Type	Sri Lankan	Origin	Date
NBP <sup>1</sup>	Auradhapura (Citadel)	North India	250 B.C.
PGW	Anuradhapura (Citadel)	North India	600-500B.C.
Red Polished Ware	Mantai	Gujarat, 1 <sup>st</sup> -4 <sup>th</sup> Maharashtra	C.A.D.
Red Polished Ware <sup>2</sup> (RPW)	Jetavana Anuradhapura (Citadel), Abhayagiri, Mantai	Gujarat Maharashtra	1 <sup>st</sup> - 3 <sup>rd</sup> / 4 <sup>th</sup> C.A.D.
Indo-Sasanian Fine Ware <sup>3</sup>	Anuradhapura, Jetavana	North West India	End 3rd c.A.D.
Late Red Polished Ware <sup>4</sup>	Abhayagiri, Anuradhapura Mantai	India	4 <sup>th</sup> -7th c.A.D.
Intaglio Seals <sup>5</sup>	Anuradhapura citadel, Jetavana, Tissamaharama	India or Sri Lanka,? India and Sri Lanka, North Western India	end 3rd c.A.D.? 3 <sup>rd</sup> C.B.C.
Later Red Polished <sup>(b)</sup> (White Kaolin Fabric)	Sigiriya	India	5 <sup>th</sup> c.A.D.

Jetavanarama. <sup>(41)</sup> It indicates that seal carving was practiced in the region, using carnelian imported from North India.

### Coins

Coins discovered in Sri Lanka throw light on the early commerce that flourished time to time between the island and the North India. It is not possible to determine when these earliest coins from North India were introduced into Sri Lanka. The historians surmised that these coins came in the second half of the third century.B.C. "Pearls and pieces of money" mentions in *Mahavamsa* can be recognized as the earliest forms of Sri Lankan currency and money. The silver coins of the pre Mauryan origin referred to as *Puranas* <sup>(42)</sup> *Katthapanna* in pali, *Karshapana* in Sanskrit, and in ancient Brahmi these coins have been known as *Katthavana*. <sup>(43)</sup> The earliest references to the usage of coins in Sri Lanka can be found in the Buddhist literature. These coins have 56 grain weight, generally made of silver, punched with a royal mark on them reached the Sri Lankan shores in ancient times from India. The coins were manufactured by subdividing bare of metal or chips cut from a hammered sheet, the weight being adjusted where essential, by clipping the corner of each coin so formed. Asokan missionaries and traders as well as royalty over the years are considered among those who introduced these coins to the island. <sup>(44)</sup> The development of coinage of an indigenous flavour would therefore have necessarily followed. Sometime mercantile communities issued these coins after the approval of the king. <sup>(45)</sup>

All the Puranas' coins found in the island have been imported from North India. The materials

of which they seem to be composed are not products of Sri Lanka.

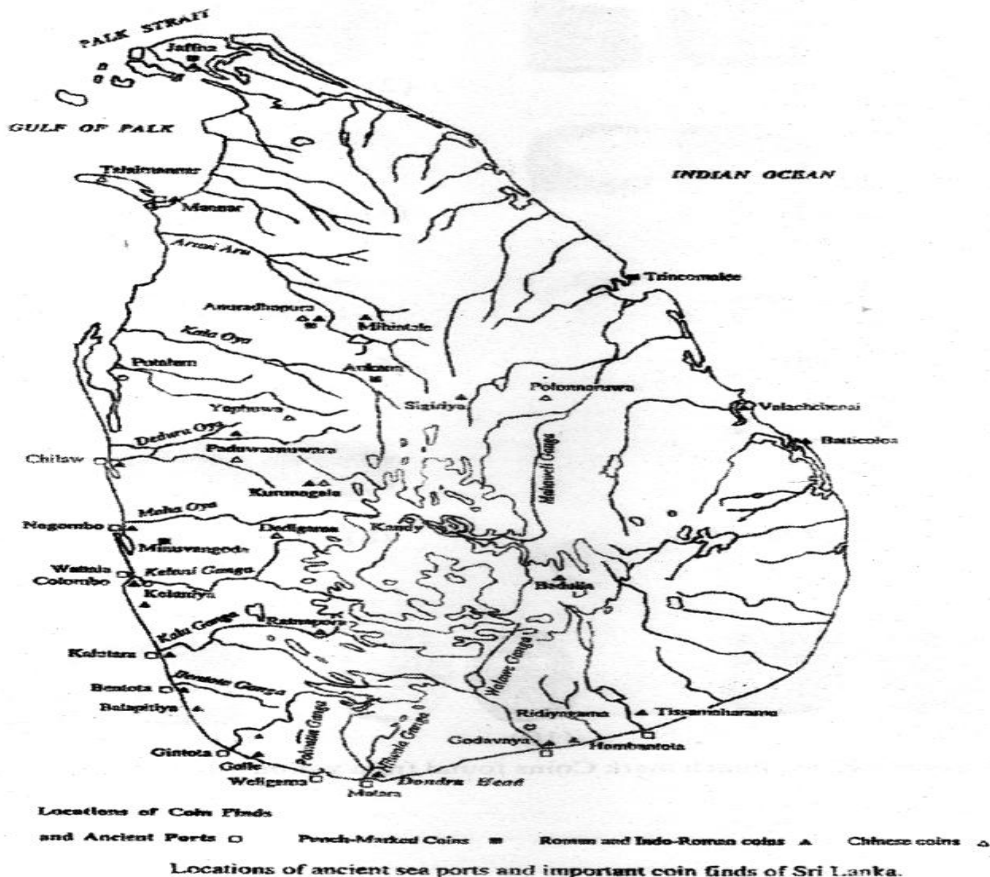
Hence it is a proof of the early trade with India. <sup>(46)</sup> The common design on the observe of this money are the royal sun symbol. A circle with six emblems round it, the dog, the elephant, the bull, a fishes the turtle, forms of trees and a three arched structure surmounted in one case by a crescent. On the reverse side some coins have several symbols which are nearly worn away, but as a rule there were some marks as royal sun, the tree and the structure with three arches. <sup>(48)</sup> with few exceptions, all the punch marked coins found in the island are smaller thicker coins attributed to the middle and late Mauryan periods. <sup>(49)</sup> According to Codrington <sup>(50)</sup> the absence of any symbol on these coins, which can be attributed to Sri Lanka leads us to assume that all the genuine punch marked coins found in the island were imported from North India. This is now proved by the discovery of many terracotta moulds with *Karshapana* imprints in the excavations at Gedige (Anuradhapura) and many other places. <sup>(51)</sup> They show that some of these coins cast were cast in Sri Lanka. The moulds we were able to examine are identical to ones found in Haryana in North India. As in India, Sri Lankan mint masters may have made these coins by casting methods, completely different from the original punching technique, during a period when no more *Kahapanna* were issued.

Punch marked coins were no longer issued in India after the decline of the Mauryan Empire, and India's earliest coins were then replaced by the issues of the Indo- Greeks followed by the Indo – Scythians the Indo- Parthians and the Kushanas who occupied the north western provinces of the Maurayan Empire.

A certain number of coins belonging to these dynasties are found in Sri Lanka. The most ancient coins next to *kahappana* found in Sri Lanka are an Indian standard drachm of Indo-Greek Menander.<sup>(52)</sup> Ten coins of *Soter megas*, which were up till now unknown in the Sri Lankan context,<sup>(53)</sup> are found from the different places of the island.<sup>(54)</sup> According to recent discoveries it has been identified that Soter megas's dynastic name was vim Taktu. He was the grandfather of the Kushana king Kanishka I.<sup>(55)</sup> the coin of Kanishka II, of the Kushana dynasty found in the excavations conducted at Jetavanarama is too significant.<sup>(56)</sup> Ten more coins of the same ruler are found from the southern coast of the island. H.W. Codrington<sup>(57)</sup> mentions four specimens of king Vasudeva. These are the first coins of Kushana kings ever found in Sri Lanka in an archaeological context. A silver coin of Viradaman of the western ksatrapas (c. 234-239) was found buried at the foot of one of the stupa along with the coin of Kanishka II.<sup>(58)</sup> The gold coin of Smudragupta. Chandragupta and Skandagupta were the last issues of ancient north Indian dynasties so far attested in the island.<sup>(59)</sup> So the ancient Sri Lanka was primarily a commercial oriented trading nation not an agricultural one. It was an export economy. The oceanic voyages of Indian traders, monks, and visitors to Sri Lanka are often mentioned in both countries literature. All historical and commercial interaction is difficult to understand without understanding the trade routes. Historical evidences provide information that there were many

flourished trade routes in use which went from India to Sri Lanka also vice versa. Jataka stories refer many sea voyages to Sri Lanka made by North Indian merchants through the eastern shores. Thus these North Indian merchants discovered land route as well as sea route. During the first century B.C. three well known routes were famous for travel from India to Sri Lanka. Two of which passed through South India. All the three routes started from Patiliputra (modern Patna). One of these routes passed through Prayag (Allahabad), Kausambi (Kosambi), Bharhut, Vidisa, Ujjain, Mahsmati (Mandhata) and Pratishtana (Paithan) to the mouths of the Godavari and Krishna skirting the south east coast to Sri Lanka.<sup>(60)</sup> Colonists sailed by this coastal route throughout the historical period. The second route started from Ujjain and went to the sea port of Brighukaccha (Bharukaccha, the modern Broach), from which people sailed southwards along the coast of western India to Sri Lanka, after touching at Suparaka (Sopara) (in the Thana district of Maharashtra). The third route started from across the Bay of Bengal. It started from Patiliputra and went along the Ganges upto Tamralipti (Tamluk) and from there to Sri Lanka along the eastern coast. The Bhikkus, who entered into the Sri Lanka probably, followed the first route, and the traders and others followed the second and the third routes. So all these routes are not mere trade route these also helped to spread cultural activities. These trade routes increased trade and commercial activities between India and Sri Lanka.

Ancient India



### Conclusion

In the light of what we have discussed above shows that Sri Lanka has its glorious past in the field of trade and commerce. In the starting the traders of Sri Lanka had small scale trade relation but later they developed themselves as middlemen and as international merchants. Through this work an attempt is made that relation of Sri Lanka and north India can be studied under one roof. This is also an effort to present a balance and a noteworthy study between these two regions with the help of literary and archaeological evidences. Those relations that were maintained from the remote past are still working between these two countries. That's why this topic create an interest among the readers.

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59. Osmund Bopearachchi, 1998, *ibid.*, p.155
60. Manisha Tyagi, *Trade routes between India and Sri Lanka in Ancient Period (with special reference to its ports), Region in Indian History*, ed. By Mahendra Pratap, S.Z.H. Jafri, 2008, Anamika Publisher, New Delhi, P.234

**Illustration of Table**

1. W. Wijayapala and Martha Prickett, ' Sri Lanka and the International Trade: An Exhibition of Ancient Imported Ceramics found in Sri Lanka's Archaeological Sites', Colombo, Archaeological Department, 1986, p.4
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3. *Ibid.*, pp.11,13
4. *Ibid.*, p.8
5. S.Paranavitana, *The Excavations in the Citadle of Anuradhapura*, Colombo, *Memories of the Archaeological Survey of Ceylon*, vol. 3, 1936; Henry parker, *Ancient Ceylon*, New Delhi, Asian Educational Services Report, 1984, p.494; *The Quarterly of the Cultural Triangle UNESCO- Sri Lanka Project II (i)*, 1984, Front Cover.