

# Trade Centers between India and Sri Lanka in Ancient Period

## Abstract

The Island of Sri Lanka glitters like a pearls at the utmost end of the South India. This is probably the first country of South Asia that had been deeply influenced by Indian civilization and culture. Both countries had a wide trade economy because of their fertile land and trade related productions like pearls, gem stones, spices and many more things. As we know that Sri Lanka is surrounded by water in all sides and India is surrounded by three sides. That's why both countries had many important ports of great value and became witnesses of many historical events also.

The mercantile profession was the reputable profession in early Sri Lanka. An inscription about 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., found in the Karavakgala area in Yala district, refers to a man named Siva (*Kasaka cavani ca sivasa*). Who engaged himself in trading activities. The *Rasvahini* also refers to a wealthy farmer who was engaged in distant trade in addition to his agricultural activities. During ancient period north India and south India were well engaged with Sri Lanka through trade. Indian traders mostly followed Land routes; later they embarked on ships and followed water routes to Sri Lanka.

There were many ports on Indian costs playing an immense role in mari time trade from earliest time up to today. Orissa, being situated on the border of the sea had trade relations with foreign countries from earliest time. The significant ports on the coasts of Kalinga were the port of "Tamralipti", Che-li-ta-lo, "Paloura-Dantapura" and "pithunda" with well equipped ships. The geographical location of Kalinga was also responsible to control the trade routes passing from north to south India. *Chi-li-ta-lo* was another trading centre according to Chinese pilgrim Huien-Tsang. Tamilnadu also presented trade links with Sri Lanka. It is significant that ancient ports like *Tondi*, *Muziris*, *Neleynda*, *Karkoi*, *Alangankulam*, *Kaveripattinam* and *Arikamedu (Poduke)* were situated either on the banks of the river (*peruntu-rai*) or at the mouth of the river (*mun-turai*). For examples, *Muziris*, *Korkoi*, *Alangakulam*, *Kaveripattanam* are situated respectively on the rivers of the Periyar, the Tamraparni, the Vaigai and the Kaveri.

Sri Lankan records and other literary sources often refers to a number of ports among them Mahathiththa was considered as the most ancient. It is located to the North –west of the Island on the *malwathu river* mouth. In connection of trade with India it was very significant port. Jumbukola was also a reputed port mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*. Now it is identified as *sambalthurai*, in *Kankesanthurai* in Jaffna peninsula in the northern part of the island served to the port in North India. It was also the port of entry to Aryan from north India. However references are made in *Mahavamsa* about Jumbukola as the port for religious interaction. The sacred sapling of Shri Mahabodhi of Gaya (India) arrived in the charge of Sanghmitra through Jambukola. Uratota was another port attained importance as a port of maritime commercial activity especially during the reign of Pollonuruva kings. The *Mahavamsa* mentions a port called Uruvela connected with pearl banks, and used as a trading port by the followers of Vijaya. Consequently, there was an increasing awareness in the north – east Zone of Sri Lanka wherein Gokanna (Trincomalee) port was located. It is noteworthy that between seventh and tenth centuries A.D. four sinhalese kings Aggabodhi IV, Aggabodhi VII. Udaya 1<sup>st</sup> and sena 1<sup>st</sup> left Anuradhapura and rules from Polonnuruwa situated on the banks of the Mahaweli ganga within easy access to Trincomalee.

**Keywords:** Yakkhinish, Tamralipti, Rasvahini, Mahathiththa, Jumbukola, Tissa, Uratota, Parakramabahu I, Uruvela, Gokanna, Mahavamsa.

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## Introduction

The Island of Sri Lanka glitters like a pearls at the utmost end of the South India. It is also known as "Pearl of the Indian Ocean". This is probably the first country of South Asia that had been deeply influenced by Indian civilization and culture. Both countries had a wide trade economy because of their fertile land and trade related productions like pearls, gem stones, spices and many more things. As we know that Sri Lanka is surrounded by water in all sides and India is surrounded by three sides. That's why both countries had many important ports of great value and became witnesses of many historical events also. Ports played a remarkable role in one countries economy and in the context of these two countries these ports had continuous dealing with each other. So, this is the aim of this paper to present the role of ports in this perspective.

## Objective of the Paper

Trade centers or we can say ports on the shores of a country really has an immense role in the field of economy, commerce or especially in spreading the cultural activities between two countries. In the case of Indo Sri Lankan studies this logic was really productive because location of both countries in the Ocean and their close proximity has no means to cancel their relation with each other. This is the main objective of this paper is to present its importance in front of the readers that how these port centers played a role of connecting of civilizations with each other. Actually there were many ports located on the shores of Sri Lanka but which ports has great importance in the context of India that will be the part of this study.

## Trade Centers between India and Sri Lanka in Ancient Period

The mercantile profession was the reputable profession in early Sri Lanka. Most of the people in Sri Lanka normally followed either agriculture or trade as their occupation. Sometimes they followed trade along with agriculture.<sup>1</sup> An inscriptional record assigned to the period about 1<sup>st</sup> century B.C., found in the Karavakgala area in Yala district, refers to a man named Siva (*Kasaka cavani ca sivasa*).<sup>2</sup> Who engaged himself in Agrarian as well as in trading activities. The *Rasvahini* also refers to a wealthy farmer who was engaged in distant trade in addition to his agricultural activities.<sup>3</sup> It means that only those people who were economically well established could carry out trading activities of this kind. Hence, it is obvious that the merchants in Sri Lanka by this period were not a numerous as agriculturist. During ancient period north India and south India were well engaged with Sri Lanka through trade. Indian traders mostly followed Land routes; later they embarked on ships and followed water routes to Sri Lanka. According to the *Valhassa Jataka*, before the Aryans migrated to this country, the *Yakkhinis* (female aborigines) often wrecked the ships of the merchants. On one occasion they captured five hundred merchants.<sup>4</sup>

There were many ports on Indian coasts playing an immense role in oceanic trade from earliest time up to today. Orissa, being situated on the border of the sea had trade relations with foreign countries

from earliest time. Unfortunately, we have very little information on this captivating subject. Orissa, being situated on the border of the sea had trade relations with foreign countries from earliest time. It was a rich city and was very famous as a marine power. Kalidas in his *Raghuvamsa –Mahakavya* describes the king of Kalinga as *the lord of the sea* (mahodadhipti)<sup>5</sup>. The *Aryamanjushrimulakalpa*, a text of Mahayana Buddhism, describes kalinga as (*kalingodresu*), all islands in the kalinga sea. It seems that the eastern sea or the modern Bay of Bengal was known in the past as the 'Kalinga Sea', dominated by the merchant of Kalinga<sup>6</sup>. The significant ports on the coasts of Kalinga were the port of "Tamralipti", Che-li-ta-lo, "Paloura-Dantapura" and "pithunda" with well equipped ships. The geographical location of Kalinga was also important to control the trade routes passing from north to south India. In these circumstances the economic reason seems to have been the principal consideration of the Kalinga war. Probably Asoka's mission against Kalinga was inspired due to the same reason. Among others who desired to control the ports and the trade routes passed through Kalinga.<sup>7</sup>

*Tamralipti* or modern Tamluk in Midnapur district of west Bengal was a well known port that maintained maritime relations with Sri Lanka. In the days of Asoka, Indian missionaries passed through this port to and from Sri Lanka. In the fifth century A.D., Fah-sien left for China via Sri Lanka from the port of Tamralipti.<sup>8</sup> Tamralipti also played noteworthy role in spreading cultural and commercial relations between Sri Lanka and India.

*Chi-li-ta-lo* was another trading centre according to Chinese pilgrim Huien-Tsang, "it was a through fare and resting place for sea going traders and strangers for distant lands". The exact identification of this port is still a problem. Cunningham identified it as *Puri* today. Standing on its shore Huien-Tsang could imagine of the sparkling rays emanating from the gem placed on the Tooth relic of Buddha in Sri Lanka.<sup>9</sup> The sailors of Kalinga were quite familiar to making voyages to Sri Lanka. The sea –mercantile between Orissa and Sri Lanka might have continued throughout the ancient period. Sri Lanka occupied a strategic position so far as inter-oceanic commerce was concerned. It was a gathering place for merchants and sailors coming from the east as well as the west. Trade between Kalinga and Sri Lanka might have been increased as a result of the strong political link that existed between the two countries.

Tamilnadu also presented trade links with Sri Lanka. The location of emporium along rivers facilitated dealings with the interior regions. It is significant that ancient ports like *Tondi*, *Muziris*, *Neleynda*, *Karkoi*, *Alangankulam*, *Kaveripattinam* and *Arikamedu (Poduke)* were situated either on the banks of the river (*peruntu-rai*) or at the mouth of the river (*mun-turai*).

Most of the important ancient capitals of Sri Lanka were situated on the bank of big rivers. Each river had one port on the coast. Manthai, the most active port in ancient Sri Lanka, located close to the Aruvi-Aru river. It linked the port to the inland capital

of Polonnaruwa on the banks of the Mahaveli river, that flows to the sea at Gokanna, although is not a coincidence. In the same way ancient city of Sri Lanka, Tissamaharama, established to the south along the higher ground on the left bank of the Kirindiya connected many ancient port sites of Kirinda. The sea ports subjects of our investigations are situated at the estuaries of rivers i.e. Salavattota (Chilaw) at the Deduru-Oya, Wattala at the Kelani-Ganga, Kalatiittha (Kalutara) at the Kalu-Ganga, Bhimatiittha (Bentota) at the Bentota Ganga, Gimhatiittha (Gintota) at the Gin-Ganga, Mahavaluka-gama (Weligama) at the Palwatta Ganga, Nilwalatiittha (matara) at the Nilwala Ganga, Gothapabbata (Godavaya) at Walawe Ganga and Kirinda at the Kirinda Oye.<sup>10</sup>

### **Mahathiththa (Mathota)**

Sri Lankan records and other literary sources often refer to a number of ports among them Mahathiththa was considered as the most ancient. Mahathiththa was highly praised in the *Mahavamsa*. It is located to the North-west of the Island on the Malwathu river mouth (same river flowing near Anuradhapura). In connection of trade with India it was very significant port. Though it is not possible to ascertain when this port became operational yet it could be assured without fear of contradiction that the port was in existence even during the period of Aryan colonization in the Island.<sup>11</sup> The *Jataka* stories cover a number of references to voyages of north Indian merchants to Sri Lanka. The account of *Valhass Jataka* refers to one of the ports situated on the North West coast of Sri Lanka.<sup>12</sup> The Pandu king (pandayan) sent wives for Vijaya, the king of Sri Lanka and his supporters along with one thousand families of eighteen guilds to Sri Lanka. They all landed at the port of Mahathiththa.<sup>13</sup>

During the reign of Vatthagamani Abhaya seven Tamils from south India landed at Mahathiththa with strong forces and marched towards Anuradhapura.<sup>14</sup> According to *Rasvahini*, there was a merchant of Mahathiththa named Nandi, who carried trade exportation to other countries. He is said to have been of a fleet of ships<sup>15</sup> the *Sahassavattu*, speaks of another resident merchant of Mahathiththa who sold his goods throughout the country. It seems that Mahathiththa was a well developed commercial center during this period.<sup>16</sup> The existence of Hindu shrines *Truketisavaram* at Mahathiththa, is a clear indication that Indian Hindus carried on trade with Sri Lanka through the port. Business dealing in pearl fisheries flourished through Mahathiththa port. It became a port of great commercial interest both for the natives and for the foreigners.<sup>17</sup> One more temple named Rajarajavarattu Mahadeva was constructed by the chola conqueror Rajaraja I, near the port in the XI century. The trading communities and soldiers living there worshiped in the temple.<sup>18</sup>

It was one of the most important ports for vessels coming from South India. The greater population of this port was South Indian. Mahathiththa positioned at the mouth of the Malwathu river had easy access to the capital Anuradhapura, which was located on the Banks of the same river.<sup>19</sup> After the 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the importance of the port of

Mahathiththa had been diminished to some extent, but Mahathiththa did not completely lost its attraction. Mahathiththa continued as a chief port of Rajarata at least up to the middle of the thirteenth century. The *Rasvahini* recorded the Polonnuruwa period implies the trader's collect various commodities of Mahathiththa and sold them in the interior. The *Saddharmalankara* refers to the merchant of Mavatu-patuna who went east wards to trade. In the Sangam literature there are many references to this port. It is mentioned as one of the greatest port with plenty of pearl and sea-gems.<sup>20</sup>

The name of Mahathiththa was later changed *Rajas -raja-puram* by a Hindu community living there.<sup>21</sup> A Chola inscription refers to another temple called *Tiruviramisvaram Usaiyar* at this port. Mahathiththa was held in adoration both by the Sri Lankan and Tamils. The references in the *Saddharmalankaraya* of a trader of this port proceeding in land for trading indicated that there was free and fair access to all communities to this port as well as for other ports of the Island for trade and commerce.<sup>22</sup>

There are sufficient evidences to show that this commercial centre was one of the most important provincial administrative centres in Sri Lanka. The *Rasvahini*, refers to a minister named Siva who was appointed governor of this place.<sup>23</sup> The *Rasvahini* also records the splendour of Mahathiththa as follows, "at that time the king appointed one of his minister named Siva, as the governor of Mahathiththa he got all the streets properly cleaned and decorated beautifully and having caused flags and banners to fly on the buildings mounted on a beautifully adorned chariot accompanied by a powerful army of soldiers, and the state drive along the streets encircling the entire Mahapattana." From this it is obvious that Mahathiththa had developed to the status of a city with well arranged streets. Multi-storeyed buildings with attractive balconies were also in this city (alankatapasada tale).<sup>24</sup> This shows that inhabitants of this city were rich people, mostly belonging to the merchant class.

The *Rasvahini*, also reports how the wives of the merchants referred to above, having decked her with all kind of precious ornaments, watched the state drive of the newly appointed governor, from the balcony of her house with a retinue of female slaves.<sup>25</sup> This certainly shows the status of the comforts enjoyed by the average citizen of this town. Thus, we can see that the place had all the necessary characteristics of a city.

### **Jambukola**

Jambukola was also a reputed port mentioned in the *Mahavamsa*. Now it is identified as *sambalthurai*, in *Kankesanthurai* (Jaffna peninsula) in the northern part of the island served to the port in North India. Especially to Tamralipti in Bengal,<sup>26</sup> which in turned was the transits port to Sri Lanka.<sup>27</sup> It was not a commercial port but it served the purpose of travel between India and Sri Lanka in the days the Anuradhapura kingdom. In pre Christian era it was exclusively the port of communication with Bengal, and also the port of entry to Aryan from north India. It

was through this port the envoys of the king Devanampiya Tissa (the king of Sri Lanka Later honoured by the King Asoka the great) in the third century B.C. set out to the court of Emperor Asoka of India.<sup>28</sup> Jambukola and Anuradhapura was connected by a high way and king Devanampiya Tissa had the road prepared.<sup>29</sup> After the reign of king Devanampiya Tissa, Jambukola diminished its importance and Mannar (Mahathitha), distance of what to Anuradhapura, and was half of what fell in to prominence of Jambukola. However references are made in *Mahavamsa* about Jumbukola as the port for religious interaction.<sup>30</sup> the sacred sapling of Shri Mahabodhi of Gaya (India) arrived in the charge of Sanghmitra through Jambukola, and king Devanampiya Tissa marked this event by building the Jambukola vihara on this very port. All these evidences show that jambukolapattana became more important than any other port so far as the cultural and commercial relations with northern India were concerned 300 B.C. it is also sensible to say that the area adjoining Jambukolapattana not only developed into a well organized commercial town, but it was also occupied mainly by Buddhists, for this was considered an important place of Buddhism during this period.<sup>31</sup> According to *sammohanvinodini*, during the reign of Brahmina Tissa, his kingdom suffered famine. When the bhikkus wanted to go over to India, they assembled at Nagadipa and took ship at Jambukolapattana.<sup>32</sup>

Further, according to the *Samantapasadika*, when the Thera *Tissadatta* came from India to Sri Lanka, he too embarked at the same port.<sup>33</sup> Both the *Mahavamsa* and the *Samantapasadika* inform us that there was a monastic centre in the city known as Jambukola Vihara. This Vihara was so well known among the Buddhists as a pilgrim centre that even the people from Yonarattha came to worship the *cetiya* in this vihara.<sup>34</sup> According to both the *Rasvihini*<sup>35</sup> and the *Sahassavatthu*,<sup>36</sup> there were hundreds of resident monks in Nagadipa. It should also be noted here that one of the eight Bo-saplings sprung up from the seeds of the sacred *bodhi tree*, planted here.<sup>37</sup>

After the reign of king Devanampiya Tissa Jambukola diminished its importance and Mathoddam, which was closer to Anuradhapura, came into prominence. However, references about Jumbukolapattana are available in the *Mahavamsa* as a port of religious importance.

### Uratota

It is located in the northern part, near the modern Kaytes, and then known as Urkavalthurai in the Jaffna is of importance and is referred to in the story and verses of the ritual Kohombakankaria. This port being a port of call of foreign merchants is mentioned in an inscription found at *Nainethivu*.<sup>38</sup> Uratota attained importance as a port of maritime commercial activity especially during the reign of Polonnuruva kings. The *nainativu* Tamil inscription datable to the reign of Parakramabahu I, suggested that vessels laded with commodities arrived at the port of Uraturai, this edict proclaims that foreign traders should be given the protection. It contains rules and regulations regarding wrecked ships that

brought merchandise.<sup>39</sup> A chola inscription datable as 1178 A.D. refers to the building of ships and the assembling of troops at Uraturai by Parakramabahu I during his south Indian campaign. The *Pujavaliya* also mentions this port as one fortified by Megha, the king invader of the 12<sup>th</sup> century who ransacked the country most brutally.<sup>40</sup> Both Jambukolapattnam and Uraturai would have continued as important ports connecting south India and Jaffna even in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Jaffna maintained close contacts with South India.<sup>41</sup> It can be assumed that this and the port mentioned above must have been used long after the Sinhalese kings lost interest because Tamil have settled there in huge numbers.

### Uruvela

Another port mentioned in the *Mahavamsa* on the western coast is Uruvela.<sup>42</sup> The *Mahavamsa* mentions a port called Uruvela connected with pearl banks, and used as a trading port by the followers of Vijaya.<sup>43</sup>

### Gokanna

Consequently, there was an increasing awareness in the north – east Zone of Sri Lanka wherein Gokanna (Trincomalee) port was located. It is noteworthy that between seventh and tenth centuries A.D. four sinhalese kings Aggabodhi IV, Aggabodhi VII. Udaya I<sup>st</sup> and sena I<sup>st</sup> left Anuradhapura and rules from Polonnuruwa situated on the banks of the Mahaweli ganga within easy access to Trincomalee.<sup>44</sup>

Thus the emergence of Polonnuruwa and the port of Gokanna are significant in terms of the changing patterns of trade between the Bay of Bengal and Sri Lanka. The South Indian Chola occupation of Polonnuruwa (1017-1070) was partly motivated by the commercial policy of the Chola kings who aimed at controlling the western sea near the Bay of Bengal. The importance of Gokanna, the Bay of Bengal and South East Asian trade was relied by the Sinhalese rulers of Polonnuruwa particularly vijayabahu I<sup>st</sup> (1070-1110) and Parakramabahu (1153-1186).

### Conclusion

Besides it, there were many ports located on Sri Lankan coasts but all of them were not useful for Indo Sri Lankan trade. Only the ports situated in North West zone played a great role in trade between two countries but later when Sri Lanka established its trade and cultural links with other world many other ports developed on different shores. But in Indian context Jambukola, Mahathitha, Uratota and Uruvelapattanam were important. These ports played a major role in spreading trade or cultural activities especially with India. After the seventh century, the principal arena for the east –west exchange trade shifted from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. Ports situated on the South Zone played a vital role in linking eastern countries with western countries. These ports played role of mediators among the trading systems prevalent there.

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