

Full Text - Ameena Hussein

Author and novelist

Aboul feda, Abou zeyd, Abu Abdallah, Albateny, Albyrouni, Ashref, Edrisi, Massoudi, Soleyman, one could be forgiven if someone thought this was a roll call for a Muslim school somewhere in the country but you might be surprised to find out they are actually the names of some of the travelers, geographers, historians and navigators who documented details about Lanka from as early as the 9th century. And what they had in common was that they were all from the Arab World, which at its height spanned from North Africa to the Caucasus with settlements in India and China

Earliest written documentation shows us that the Arab geographers like Massoudi, Edrisi and Aboul feda included Lanka in their maps. A very early travelogue from about 851 AD titled *The Two Mahometans* has one of its authors Abou Zeyd an amateur geographer of Bassora describe the deep and broad valleys that open to the sea, which he called gobbs. The other author Soleyman was a merchant from Baghdad who describes the tradition of embarking on pilgrimage to Al-rhoun a name derived it is thought from the Ruhuna district where Adam's Peak or Sri Pada , the sacred mountain is situated.

One can begin to appreciate that for so small a country throughout the ages it has drawn much attention from other parts of the world. It even was a model of multiculturalism and acculturation for in the 12th century Edrisi in his *Geography* illustrates that the king had in his council of sixteen officers 4 Buddhists, 4 Christians, 4 Jews and 4 Muslims. There were many attractions that drew people

here – you had the finest gems, pearls, spices, sacred spaces and was located ideally in the Indian Ocean for a stopping point before continuing east or west.

But out of all the Arab writing and documentation that has been done, personally for me, one man stands out and that is the Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta. A little bio on the man would read like this: Having left home alone at the tender age of 21 after graduating as a jurist, to embark on a pilgrimage to the holy land of Mecca, he stays there for three years, studying and engaging with scholars who have come from all parts of the world on pilgrimage. Listening to their stories, he decides to make travel his vocation and promises that he will visit every Muslim country and community that exists in the known world between Morocco and China. And thus in 1330 he leaves Mecca and continues on. He arrives in India in 1333 and stays in the court of Sultan Tughluq as Chief Qadi or judge for almost 9 years. In 1341 he finally is sent as ambassador to the Khan of China accompanied by an entourage bearing gifts.

However, Ibn Battuta due to a maritime mishap loses all the gifts in a storm in the South of India and dare not return to Delhi with this bad news. So, he makes a detour to the Maldives to check how that Muslim country of 200 years of Muslim faith is getting along. Again, he stays there for a good many months, enjoying life, marrying four wives and living the good life. Unfortunately Ibn Battuta was a meddler of politics and he is run out of the country and this is where his journey to Lanka begins.

Having fled the Maldives in 1344, Ibn Battuta believed he was headed for the South of India, but he didn't take into account the vagaries of the weather and the ship battled a storm for nine days, eventually landing on the shores of Puttalam,

from where they could see Adam's Peak or Sri Pada and then all on board realized they had landed in Serandib, because the mountain was a landmark.

Ibn Battuta met the King of the Jaffna Kingdom, Arya Chakrawartiw who had a large shipping fleet that was known throughout the world. The king had a reputation of being a fierce king who was apt to take ships hostage. However, Ibn Battuta being a well travelled man, of high reputation wooed the king, who invited him to be a honoured guest. While there, Ibn Battuta saw the king amongst his treasures of pearls, rubies, cinnamon and aloes. They communicated in Persian which was the English of the day and eventually the king sent Ibn Battuta on pilgrimage to the holy mountain in a palanquin, escorted by Brahmins, yogis, porters and courtiers.

Ibn Battuta was most impressed with the island. He travels to Kurunegala which was the capital of Lanka but never meets the Sinhala king. He says the king has a white elephant which is adorned with rubies and parades through the streets. He speaks of the flora and fauna of the land - elephants, the monkeys, veddahs, leeches and was the first to document the rhododendron tree growing on the peak slopes. He details the pilgrimage where you had ten chains to climb to the top and often people were blown off the peak never to complete the pilgrimage. He said you climbed up the harder route and came down the easier route – which he called the father's route and the mother's route. From Adam's Peak where he stayed for three days and completed the pilgrimage and came down on the Mother's route. And then they followed the path of the Blue Cloud River or Nilwala Ganga and went down to Devi Nuwara or Dondra Head. At that time, Devi Nuwara had the largest temple which stretched a kilometer from the shore inland. He describes the idol who was made out of gold and had rubies for its eyes. The temple was later destroyed by the Portuguese and now lies in the sea.

Ibn Battuta winds his way through Galle, then Colombo and meets the ruler of the city Jalasti, Emir of the sea who has 500 Abyssinian warriors in his force. He returns to Puttalam, thanks the Arya Chakrawarti for his patronage and leaves the island.

Thus ends Ibn Battuta's journey in the island of Lanka.