

**Full Text** - Prof. Asanga Tilakaratne

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Rhythms of Paradise

## **Portrayal of Sri Lanka as a Destination: From Antiquity to Modernity**

Friends!

Presenting the Sri Lankan culture to a global audience. Let me highlight some historical reasons why one should visit Sri Lanka.

It is interesting to note that Sri Lanka was known among ancient Arabic travellers as Serendib, which, according to the Longman's Dictionary of English Language and many other sources, derived from the two Sanskrit-Sinhala terms Sinhala Dvipa, the island of Sinhalas. In English language, however, a derivative term, 'serendipity' means 'the occurrence and development of events by chance in a happy or beneficial way'. The fairy tale belonging to the 18<sup>th</sup> century, "Three Princes of Serendib" popularized the term. In this story the princes were very lucky. The good thing is the island was identified with happiness, pleasant surprises and joy.

Although relatively small in size, Sri Lanka has a long history: recorded history goes more than 23 centuries, definitely starting from Emperor Asoka's time in India, 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE.

The Mahavamsa, the ancient Chronicle of Sri Lanka written in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, records history of the island starting from the arrival of Prince Vijaya and his group, roughly around the 6<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> centuries BEC. According to the same

Mahavamsa, this event coincided with the Mahaparinirvana – Great Passing of the Buddha.

Indian legends have it that Lanka was ruled by the king called Ravana who challenged even gods, and as doing tit-for-tat, brought forcibly Sita, wife of Rama, the god incarnate to Lanka. Up to today, the sentiment is love-hate: although Ravana is hated, at the same time, he was feared and respected. In Sri Lanka, the Sanskrit Poem, *Janakiharana*, which narrates Rama-Ravana episode is attributed Sri Lanka ruler Kumaradasa.

Why I bring these legends belonging to pre-history is to give an idea to you the evolution the Indian perception of the island. According to the Mahavamsa, the Buddha predicted that his religion will be established in this island, and asked God Upulvan to protect Vijaya and his people, --after all of us are Indians in origin -- and the legends further have that the Buddha visited three times to the island--perhaps the earliest recorded visit to the island by a foreign dignitary. What is significant is not whether or not these events actually took place, but the fact that the tradition was willing to identify itself with these beliefs.

Coming to the subsequent history of island and its relation with India, surely I cannot go into details. Monumental religious and cultural events such as the arrival of Arahant Mahinda and introduction of Buddhism to the country, the arrival of Sanghamitta and introduction of Bhikkhuni Sasana and the arrival of Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradhapura, the arrival of the Tooth relic, two objects symbolizing national religiosity, the arrival of Buddhaghosa, the great commentator of Pali canon who translated the commentaries that in Sinhala language into Pali for the benefit of the international readership – all these form significant religious and academic relations between India and Sri Lanka in antiquity.

In the Polonnaruva period, the Hindu influence to the island's culture, art, architecture and religion marks another aspect of India Sri Lanka relations which were continued unbroken but somewhat abated in subsequent centuries. In this manner, India is the key factor and, in particular, the key south Asian factor in antiquity insofar as international interactions are concerned.

Relation with East Asia, particularly with China, which were exemplified by the visits of Buddhist pilgrims who were motivated by the desire to explore the larger Buddhist world were an important factor in the ancient history of the island. Fa Hsien (of the fifth century) is the first known Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who visited the island and spent two years studying the Vinaya and other Theravada texts, and kept records of the island. Although Xuan Zang (of the 7<sup>th</sup> century) is the most well-known Chinese Buddhist traveler of the antiquity, he did not visit the island but wrote on what gathered in India from the visiting Sri Lankan monks. The Chinese sources also record that a group of Buddhist nuns from the island arrived in China and established the Bhiksuni order there – not mentioned in Sri Lanka chronicles.

Relations with South-east Asia, particularly with what is today Myanmar and Thailand, is a very significant factor starting from around the 11<sup>th</sup> century continuing till the 15<sup>th</sup> century and again starting in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Initially contacts between king Anawarath or Anuruddha of Pagan, Myanmar and Wijayabahu the Great of Polonnaruva started with king Anuruddha's enthusiasm to get a copy of the pure Theravada canon. Subsequently the relations continued particularly with monks from Pagan visiting Sri Lanka to study and to receive higher ordination, finally culminating in establishing what became known as the 'Lanka Sangha' in the region. The Myanmarian monk Chapada who came to the island, studied Vinaya, received fresh higher ordination in the 14<sup>th</sup> century is a case

in point. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century the trend got reversed, and the higher admission (upasampada) for monks was brought from Siam (present-day Thailand) and subsequently from Myanmar.

These are some highlights of South, South East and East Asian relations in which Sri Lanka was the destination. Of course there were relations in ancient times between the island and the Arabic and European nations. During the period of four and half centuries between the 16<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> we had the Portuguese, Dutch and the English coming and occupying the country. Gains and losses are a mix bag. Among the more positive things: One interesting example would be Sinhala language: It is Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit, Portuguese, Dutch and English, and, of course, Sinhala, all resulting from international relations and visits. One last example of with clearly salutary effect, not only mutually, but even globally, was Rhys Davids, 19<sup>th</sup> century English civil administrator studying Pali in Sri Lanka and establishing Pali Text Society in 1880 in England and started giving the Buddhist canon to the world, effectively starting modern world Buddhist studies. I do not plan to go into details because you will be listening shortly on those aspects of the story.

To conclude, I value this effort by a far-sighted group of people who desire to see Sri Lanka prosper again and to make it a preferred destination as it used to in the past. I started my remarks referring to the term 'serendib' used by travellers of Arabic origins to refer to the island. The term gradually acquired a meaning what we describe today in current English by terms such as 'serendipity' and serendipitous.

The efforts of this nature highlights that we are no longer serendipitous of our own destiny which we need to make by us alone. Mere talking of history in the absence

of presence is not an enviable phenomenon at all. But here we are talking of history that was in order to jump into future that will be. I take this event to be an effort to make future a reality.

I thank all of you who are responsible for this series of meaningful events! Thank you!

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