

## The Drift of Ancient Kingdoms in the Post-Polonnaruwa Period: A Critical View of the Causes of Decline of Sinhala Kingdom

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**Abstract**— The Sinhalese monarchy has its origins in the settlement of North-Indian Aryan immigrants to the island of Sri Lanka. According to historical records, the first Sinhalese kingdom was established by King Vijaya in the valley of Malwathu-Mahaweli river in 6th Century B.C. It was subsequently unified as a state during the reign of King Duttagamini and thus, the Rajarata kingdoms became a power center of administration and continued for nearly fifteen decades. However, one can notice a gradual decline of the Sinhala Kingdom after the latter part of the thirteenth century, and the geographic drift of the center of power had also taken place over time. This study was aimed at analyzing the causes of the drift of the medieval ancient kingdoms, especially in the post-Polonnaruwa period. The researches argue that the rationality of the views produced by different authors on various causes could be questioned. The causes, found in various sources, such as climatic change, collapse of the old order, exhaustion and infertility of soil, the spread of malaria, foreign invasions, the collapse of the irrigation system, and the attractions offered by the Wet Zone as against the Dry Zones are examined in detail by the researchers to gauge what has happened in the past.

**Keywords:** *Rajarata Kingdom, Oriental Despotism, Invasions*

### Introduction

The historical period of Sri Lanka starts with the arrival of Prince Vijaya in the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Since this historical event, there were several waves of migrations, such as the arrival of princes Baddakachchana and Arahath Mahinda (233 CE). During this period, there were various foreign

groups with different cultural backgrounds that arrived in Sri Lanka for the purpose of inhabitation. The first immigrants of Sri Lanka settled in the riverbanks of Malwathu Oya which was later developed as the Kingdom of Anuradhapura. The agriculture-based civilisation of Anuradhapura evolved mainly after the advent of Buddhism. Later, due to invasion by the South Indian Chola Empire, the administration was moved from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The main centers of power, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were located in the administrative heartland referred to as 'Rajarata'. The thriving economy of agriculture-based Rajarata was supported by an efficient reservoir system. The notable factor is that for nearly eighteen centuries, political, economic and social administration was centered around Rajarata. Archaeological remnants of Rajarata reveal a civilisation that flourished by following the core values of Buddhism and Hinduism. Towards the end of the twelfth century, the ancient kingdom confronted many difficulties. After a century of growth, the energy that had founded the city of Polonnaruwa, built the reservoirs in the Rajarata and retaliated the advances from South Indian and Burma. By the mid-thirteenth century, the great city was more or less abandoned and the Kingdom of Polonnaruwa collapsed. This also led to the collapse of the hydraulic civilization of Malvatu-Mahavali. This phenomenon as per W. I. Siriweera is the drift of kingdoms to the Southwest of the country.

Simultaneously, there was concentration of population in the north, resulting in the emergence of an independent Tamil kingdom in the Jaffna Peninsula in the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Dambadeniya, Yapahuva and Kurunegala in the Southwest successfully became the capital of the Sinhala kingdom from around 1232CE. onwards, but their economic and

cultural achievements were never on par with those of Rajarata. Besides, Post Polonnaruwa these centers of power of the Sinhala kings existed only for short periods. The most powerful ruler of the time - Parakramabahu the 2nd who vanquished Magha, started the restoration of Polonnaruwa, but he established his base at Dambadeniya. It is said that the area around the Thuparama in Anuradhapura was in wilderness when his son Vijayabahu the 4th started the restoration at Anuradhapura. The "Culavamsa" states that the latter assigned the protection of the city of Anuradhapura to Vanniyars or forest chiefs; proceeded to Polonnaruwa and restored it as well before leaving for his capital Dambadeniya. Historians are not in agreement on the cause led to the depopulation of Rajarata. The reasons for the decay of monumental monastic complexes, the intricate irrigation network and the degeneration technology which helped the ancient Sri Lankan to build an impressive civilization are still being debated. This paper critically analyses the causes that had been presented by various historians that said to have led to the decline of Sinhala kingdom in Post Polonnaruwa Period.

Thus the researchers argue about the rationality of the views on various. Several causes such as climatic change, collapse of old order, the decline of agriculture due to soil erosion, exhaustion and infertility of soil, the spread of the malaria, foreign invasions, the breakdown of the elaborate administrative and social fabric which sustained the complicated irrigation system, and the attractions offered by the Wet Zone as against the Dry Zones have been postulated by various scholars.

## Discussion

A. The Northern and South Indian influence vs. the decline of the medieval Rajarata kingdom  
Close commercial contacts between India and Sri Lanka are reflected in the many ancient written records and they highlight the fact that the Island was peopled by merchants in ancient times. According to Professor Paranavitana, accounts of the peopling of the Island, with merchants playing a leading role are more worthy of credence. And the episode of Kuveni reflects the victory of immigrants over the indigenous people and the synthesis of their cultures, of course with the predominance of the superior culture of the migrants. Therefore it can be concluded that the same

happened at the later part of the Anuradhapura kingdom. Although Sri Lanka had closer cultural relations with the North India, South Indian cultural interference was insignificant. But, Hindu influences could be seen through the Sri Lankan society as well as it had an impact on the popular Buddhism. According to Culavamsa some Buddhist kings patronized Hinduism. Along with scenarios such as the influence of Buddhism, it can be stated that they did not pose a severe threat upon the stability of socio-cultural co-existence within the kingdoms. Simultaneously, there were frequent threats carried out by powerful South Indian states which affected the stability and the security of the Sri Lankan state. Thus, this was an era in which territorial annexation and conquest, or direct political influences were achieved through armies marching across land or by sea and confronting opponents face to face in the battle. The series of South Indian invasions of Sri Lanka are commencing with the robbing of the royal throne by Sena and Guttika, who were the sons of a Dravidian entrepreneur engaged in trading in horses. During the weak rule of Mahinda V (982-1017 AD) Rajaraja I invaded Sri Lanka about the year 993 A.D. And king Mahinda V had to flee to Rohana region while the son of Rajaraja I known as Rajendra I, seized the crown, jewels, the diadem and other valuables to India. It marked the long-reigned Anuradhapura Kingdom which lasted for 13 centuries.

The Cholas, having sacked Anuradhapura (1017 AD) moved the capital to Polonnaruwa which they named Janantha Mangalam and it marked the initiating step towards the shift of the Sinhalese Kingdoms. It was located on the left bank of the Mahaveli river, was strategically located to thwart the resistance movements directed from the Rohana region, which was the safe haven for rebels and the birthplace of internal insurgencies against the foreign captive within the country.

While the Cholas era was able to grasp the power over Rajarata region, several leaders organized resistance against them mainly from Rohana but occasionally from the central mountain regions as well. Several regional leaders did want to make an attempt to re-gain the power into their hands including the son of the deposed king Mahinda V. But Prince Kitti became the only one who succeeded his mission of unifying all Sinhala forces against Cholas and establishing power in

Polonnaruwa. During the Polonnaruwa period, only a few who ruled from the capital could maintain their authority over the whole of Sri Lanka. Except for Vijayabahu I (1070-1110), Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) and Nissankamalla (1187-1196) the others were rulers whose territorial power was mainly in the Rajarata part of the Dry zone. Thus, it can claim that foreign invasions played a key role in the decline and fall of the Rajarata civilization. As foreign invasions are nothing new in Sri Lankan history, yet this factor needs to answer questions like what made specific invasion to the decline of Rajarata civilization and how did the collapse come at the latter part of the thirteenth century because on earlier occasions particularly when the imperial Cholas occupied Rajarata from around 993 A.D. and more effectively from 1017 A.D., the Sinhalese fought back and re-established their authority in Rajarata. For an example, Vijayabahu I (1070-1110) who successfully vanquished the Cholas maintained his hegemony for forty years at Polonnaruwa and later Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) made the country productive on an unprecedented manner. But conditions in the thirteenth century were different. Magha who captured the throne of Polonnaruwa in 1215 A.D. brought havoc in the country and inflicted terror on the people.

Devastation of Magha and conditions prevalent during and after his reign aggravated the neglect of the reservoir system and its interconnected canals as well as the destruction of religious and other monuments in Polonnaruwa. The remains of the palace of Parakramabahu I "Vaijyantha Pasada" indicate that it had been destroyed by fire. The reddish remains of the walls of the upper story suggest that the palace had been burnt at some point. Charcoal of burnt timber has also been found in this location. The Baddhasimapasada near the Alahana Parivena also displays burnt marks. It is most likely that these destructions were caused during the rule of Magha. According to the Culavamsa, Magha and his warriors 'put fetters on the wealthy and rich people and had taken away all their possessions' They wrecked the image houses, destroyed many cities, ravaged the viharas and maltreated the lay brethren. Magha also gave the monasteries, parivenas and many sanctuaries to his soldiers as dwelling places.' The "Nikaya Sangrahaya" states that the Buddhist monks left their belongings such as books and bowls in places where they

were and left Polonnaruwa hurriedly. The events that followed Magha's rule are totally different from the circumstances that prevailed when the Cholas were expelled by Vijayabahu I. Once the Cholas were vanquished, the Sinhala rulers could establish their authority in Rajarata basing Polonnaruwa as the capital and there were no further attacks from the Cholas or any other Foreign power.

Chandrabhanu, who invaded Sri Lanka towards the Mid-thirteenth century, conquered some of the regions held by Magha. Subsequently he established his authority in certain parts of northern Sri Lanka with the help of the troops from South India. Around 1258 A.D. The Pandyan King Jatavarman Sundara Pandya attacked him and levied tribute but when Chandrabhanu had established himself firmly in northern parts of the island, he defied the Pandyas and as a result, in 1263 A.D. Jatavarman Virapandya invaded his kingdom, killed him and placed a son of Chandrabhanu, who accepted the authority of the Pandyas on the throne of the northern kingdom. Thus, the Pandyas established their power in northern Sri Lanka. This event remarks the beginning of the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna and for several decades thereafter there were two kingdoms in the island. One of these, the Sinhalese kingdom controlled the southern and central parts of the island, the other, the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna, dominated the North. From this time onwards, except for a brief period of seventeen years (1450-67) under Parakramabahu VI, the country was politically divided till the British brought territorial unity in 1815 A.D. Neither the Tamil rulers nor the Sinhalese kings who lived in relative isolation in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries could establish their capital in the heart of Rajarata but ruled from Jaffna and the South West as there was an equally powerful kingdom close by.

The Sinhalese, in fact, retreated further and further into places in the hills of the wet zone specifically towards South West. The Sinhalese kings as well as the Tamil rulers probably treated the area around Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa, as a buffer region between the two kingdoms. This would also have resulted in the dislocation of the administrative and social organization in these areas. Due to the lack of a strong political center in Rajarata, communication and contacts with other areas declined. The settlements

became isolated and isolation paved the way for stagnation. The local chieftains named Vannis exercised the authority over these isolated settlements. These chieftains theoretically acknowledged the overlordship of either the Tamil or the Sinhalese king but except in one or two rare instances, for all practical purposes were independent. The disunited Vanni chieftains who were scattered all over the dry zone could not successfully organize the labor force required to maintain the reservoir system and its closely interconnected canal system. When the chain system of anicuts, channels and reservoirs was neglected the ruin was speedy and inevitable.

#### B. Collapse of 'Old Order'

The American geographer and historian of Asia, Rhoads Murphey views that the collapse social and administrative organization or the 'old order' which systematized the construction and maintenance of the complex irrigation system was the main cause for the abandonment of Rajarata Kingdoms. Murphey accepting the concept of 'oriental despotism' which was put forward by Karl Wittfogel, suggests that only a high level of organization and a massive labor force could be able to function the irrigation works and provide their constant maintenance. He also highlights that "Rajakariya" concept followed by the old society was key to have a centralized administration of a despotic nature. In his view the collapse and total disintegration of rajakariya and central authority had an absolute control of human resources adequately explain the abandonment. On the other hand, R.A.L.H. Gunawardena has dismissed the view that the ancient Sri Lankan society fitted into Wittfogel's concept of oriental despotism. He argues that it was multi-centered, where apart from the king, monastic complexes and village level organizations had a role to play in the construction and maintenance of irrigation works. For an example the colloquially known, "*vevai dagabai gamai pansalai*" concept.

Even when the central authority weakened, irrigation system functioned until the thirteenth century. A clear example is the reign of Mahinda V (982- 1017). Due to stiff opposition from mercenaries and the army as well as from people at Rajarata who refrained from paying even taxes he abandoned the palace at Polonnaruva and sought refuge in Rohana and ruled from there from 993 A.D until the Chola conquest in 1017

A.D. The Cholas brought in chaos to Rajarata. Yet, the irrigation system survived and once they were expelled the Rajarata civilization got to another start and flourished. In most periods of recorded history multi-centered administrative apparatus sustained the irrigation network. Not all kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruva were strong, but irrigation system was not hampered and disturbed even during the reigns of weaker kings.

Paranavitana, elaborating on the theme of centralization and collapse of the social order argues out that the Sinhalese nobility known as the "kulinas" suffered to the utmost during the regime of Magha and that some of them escaped to areas in which he did not have any control. In his opinion without the kulinas who had the specialized knowledge and experience in administration, including the maintenance of irrigation works, the peasants neglected their traditional obligations towards the state. However, it is hard to believe that the early kings of Dambadeniya who fought against Magha lacked the support of the kulinas or more precisely that of the officials with administrative experience and knowledge. The officialdom of the Sinhalese kingdom on the eve of the Chola occupation was not very different from that in existence at the time of Magha's invasion. They supported resistance movements and after the Cholas were vanquished, the Sinhalese succeeded in re-establishing their social order and the administrative machinery in Rajarata, but they seemed to have failed in a similar task after the defeat of Magha towards the middle of the thirteenth century. Thus, it seems that there is no valid ground to suggest that the suppression of the Sinhalese feudal nobility or kulinas and their escape from Rajarata contributed to the permanent dislocation of the social and administrative organization in Rajarata.

The crucial question one has to answer is why they made no significant attempts to reoccupy Rajarata after Magha's expulsion. Paranavitana having discussed the drain on man power and material resources during the Chola conquest in the early eleventh century and in the subsequent campaigns that led to the restoration of the Sinhalese sovereignty as well as during Parakramabahu's internal and foreign wars states that subsequent generations were not fit enough to struggle against adverse natural forces

and to resist the onslaughts of enemies from abroad. Liyanagamage and Murphey devoting attention to the weakening of human and material resources, suggests that the policies of Parakramabahu I including his expeditions abroad contributed to the sudden and complete collapse which followed his death. The weakening of the Polonnaruva kingdom would certainly have helped Magha to establish his authority in Rajarata, but once Magha's hand was removed, the Sinhalese did not successfully reoccupy strong Rajarata and maintain the reservoir system and magnificent buildings erected by their ancestors. The drain on manpower and material resources after all, is not a phenomenon peculiar to the Polonnaruva kingdom. The last of the Anuradhapura kings, Mahinda did not have resources even to pay his soldiers. Thus, the causes for the decline of the Rajarata civilization and the abandonment of the Dry Zone regions other than Jaffna peninsula have to be sought elsewhere.

### C. Climatic Changes

According to R.L. Brohier, T.W. Tyssul Jones and E.K. Cook the climatic changes and the reduction of rainfall were the main causes for the decline and fall of the Rajarata civilization. When Rhoads Murphey, in his article 'Ruin of Ancient Ceylon' published in 1957 stated climatic change as a cause for the abandonment of the Dry Zone areas, many scholars accepted that views of Murphey is correct. But the climatic factor as a cause for the decline and fall of the Rajarata civilization needs to be reconsidered and henceforth Murphey's arguments have to be re-examined. Murphey in his analysis of the causes that led to the collapse expressed the opinion that climatic conditions of the island in the past were basically similar to those of present. According to him 'Dry Zone droughts are indeed terrible and impressive experiences but occur yearly and especially clearly occurred at longer intervals of 10, 30 or 100 years throughout the ancient period' the Mahavamsa mentions them repeatedly. But it's also to be noted that there is no reference to droughts or famines in any chronicle for more than six centuries in the period between the reigns of Silameghavanna (619-28) and Parakramabahu II (1236-70). Murphey argues that the "ancient irrigation works, fords or bridges suggests that the volume of water, carried by dry zone rivers before the thirteenth century was greater than now". In his opinion one of the

strongest pieces of evidence against climatic change is that the modern and ancient irrigation works are so similar and can irrigate from the same catchment areas the same amount of cultivated land. It is not clear how he estimated the cultivated areas from the catchment areas in the Dry Zone in the past. Some of the smaller reservoirs and canals recorded in the chronicles cannot be properly identified and quite a number lie buried under a mantle of soil after the Dry Zone was finally abandoned. The large reservoirs such as the "Mahagalkadavala" also have not been restored and "Padaviya, "Vahalkada" and Mahakanadarava" reservoirs have been restored only after Murphey published his article.

The small village tanks both in Rajarata and Ruhuna functioned more effectively in the past than now. At present when large and small tanks overflow and spill in a particular year, and if the rains fail in the following year, the Dry Zone experiences drought even after the modern diversification of the Mahaveli River. It is reasonable to conclude that the capacity of the large and small tanks in the past and the area and intensity of cultivation around them were far greater than now. Murphey arguing against a climatic change states that the wet-dry zone line coincides almost exactly with the line between the ancient irrigated and un-irrigated areas. The basis of wet and dry zone divisions in fact tends to vary with different studies in climatology. The 75-inch isohyet was commonly taken as the boundary of the two zones. P.G. Cooray present on the basis of effective rainfall in the Dry Zone suggested a different boundary confirmed later by B.H. Farmer. This boundary agrees generally with that of Holmes who based his division mainly the incidence of drought. On the other hand, without changes in the locations of climatic zones there could be climatic changes or fluctuations. For instance, rain fall may decrease in the wet zone and mountain region resulting in the reduction of water carried by rivers originating from these areas. Brohier and Cook suggested that during the time of the ancient Sinhala civilization, the unbroken mantle of forest in the mountain region induced a more abundant and regular rainfall in the island. It is also likely that the agricultural conditions in the Dry Zone were relatively stable during the period of the ancient civilization.

The numerous reservoirs in the Dry Zone too indicate that the rainfall and water carried by rivers were sufficient to store water to last during the annual seasonal dry period. The flow of water through aqueducts in the royal pleasure gardens below the Tisavava and at Sigiriya and in the refectory at Mihintale was undoubtedly facilitated by pressure of water derived out of rainfall. The large-scale clearance of forest in the highland had resulted in reduction of water supplies and other ecological changes. The wooded slopes in the mountains with foliage acting as a protection to the earth served to break the force of the rainfall, to retain surface soil and to help the ground to absorb some of the moisture. When the ground absorbs moisture, sub-soil springs are formed which afford the rivers the means of maintaining a perennial flow. But conditions have been altered by the denudation of the central mountain forest resulting in the silting of large feeder channels and even rivers. Murphey states that progressive climatic change is 'intrinsically unlikely on meteorological grounds in this part of monsoon Asia marked changes have occurred in the land surface of the north-western parts of Sri Lanka between Tabbova to Tiruketisvaram near Mannal the other hand, according to P.E.P. Deraniyagala, from pre-historic times repeated elevation above the sea and submergence and that the process is a continuous one. With the oscillation phenomenon and other atmospheric factors, it is likely that there were gradual climatic changes.

The earliest map available of the Portuguese connection with Sri Lanka, drawn by the Spaniard Cypriano Sanchez and published by Petrus Plancius sometime before 1601, contains a note which states that the Kingdom of Yala was devastated by sickness three hundred years previously. Certain northern areas in the map are described as "Deserto Par Donea" or "desert through sickness". A later map which can be dated soon after 1638 with the title "Insula Zeilan Olim Taprobana Nune incolis Tenaris" which appears to be a Dutch edition of Plancius' map shows a remarkable improvement in the configuration of the island but retains the original letter press. The same note appears on it regarding Yala. The conclusion which can be drawn from this is that the Portuguese and early Dutch writers knew the Dry zone area to be a devastated guesea region. This also points to the fact that climate in the region presently known as

the Dry Zone was more salubrious during the era of the Rajarata civilization than it was in the sixteenth century A.D. The thirteenth century also witnessed two famines and droughts, during the reigns of Parakramabahu II and Bhuvanekabahu at least one of which may indicate a climatic change. Although there had been several famines earlier, the only serious one recorded prior to the thirteenth century is the famine that occurred in the reign of Vattagamani (89-77 B.C.). According to the Culavamsa, the famine which occurred during the reign of Parakramabahu II was caused through the 'influence of evil planets' and everything was burnt up'. Corn withered' and 'the whole of the people dwelling in Lanka were filled with the greatest anxiety.

#### D. Spread of Malaria

The spread of malaria being a cause for the decline and abandonment of the Rajarata civilization is a debatable point. The cause of malaria was advocated by Lucius Nichols, John Still and S. Vere Pearson in the third and fourth decades of the 20th century when malaria was rampant in Sri Lanka, particularly in the Dry Zone. There is very little evidence on the origins and spread of malaria in the global context, although some writers tended to assume that it was virulent in the Mediterranean region as well as in Han China. There is also no evidence for the spread of malaria in Sri Lanka in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries irrespective of the fact that sporadic references to diseases are made. Once the tanks and the settlements around them were abandoned, stagnant pools would have been good breeding grounds for malarial vector anopheles. But it is far-fetched to suggest that malaria was a major cause the abandonment of the ancient Sri Lankan civilization.

#### Conclusion

The foreign and civil wars which plagued the country led to oriental despotism and thus the abandonment of the ancient rajarata civilization – a hydraulic society which flourished in dry zone of Ceylon from the latter half of the first millennium B.C to the thirteenth century and the subsequent shift of the centers of population and administration to the Wet zone in the south-western portions of the island have been summarized and synthesized in this research.

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