

ABSTRACT

This research Ancient sea ports of Sri Lanka their significance today and need for new ports was carried out in order to explore, how and to what extent ancient and medieval ports of Sri Lanka functioned, present utilisation of them and finally to explore the requirement of new harbours.

Sri Lanka has a historical record of being a maritime nation, running back to the 5th century BC. Geographical situation makes it highly viable for sea trade as most of the sea routes in the Indian Ocean run close to the territorial waters of Sri Lanka. The island was connected by sea routes with ports in the southern, western and north-eastern regions of the Indian Sub-Continent and also with ports in the Arab world as well as South-East Asian Kingdoms and with China. The position of harbours on the eastern and western coasts creates many opportunities to provide harbour related services to ships sailing across the Indian Ocean. The fleet of Chinese junks carrying silk and ceramic ware to trading stations on the East African coast and the Arabian vessels transporting spices of the East Indies to European markets had to call at the ports of Sri Lanka, necessarily as a half way port in the long and arduous sea travel in sailing vessels.

Several Sri Lankan ports played important roles in maritime trade carried through these sea-routes but the importance of some of these ports varied from time to time. Ancient sea ports of Sri Lanka functioned as an entrepot ports. A port has its own hinterland or area that it serves and in turn is served by it, in terms of food supplies and merchandise for export. In early times however, when small sailing ships and galleys were in use, small creeks, bays and larger river mouths formed suitable harbours. Ports like other settlements are influenced by changing political, social and economical conditions.

Ancient Lanka had number of ports and landing sites. Importance of them were felt either over few centuries or, over much longer period, mainly due to shifting of cities and trading routes. In this research mainly four major ancient ports, Jambukolapatuna, Mahatittha, Godavaya and Gokanna are considered. Ongoing Hambantota and Colombo South Harbour projects, as well as proposed Trincomalee port development project are discussed in this research.

Although the foreign traders who lay anchor at these Sri Lanka ports they hardly recorded these ports. There is a wealth of references in Pali chronicles and Sinhala literature and additionally inscriptions enable us to piece together the international recognition of these ports during early times.

Presently Sri Lanka has three main commercial ports, Colombo in the west, Galle in the south and Trincomalee in the east. Colombo and Galle are man made while Trincomalee commands a large natural and a wide body of sheltered waters. Colombo has been the main harbour that presently handles more than 85% of total shipping activities of Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka has still not been fully able to utilize all of its geographical advantages. Its ancient ports are operating well below or nil capacity levels and harbours do not have the required equipment and adequate transport lines with its hinterlands. Unless in coming years country develops a maritime policy that makes it able to utilize correctly the opportunities it possesses, Sri Lanka cannot become one of the world's leading countries in terms of sea trade.

The Colombo port will not be able to meet satisfactorily its external trade needs in future. Hence Sri Lanka will need secondary port for this purpose as sea transportation in this region is kept on enlarging. Colombo can be the hub port for transshipment of containers from Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and other South Asian and South East Asian countries. Galle has very little area for expansion. Even with the upcoming Colombo South harbor, mainly with container handling facilities, still there will be a need exists for handling bulk cargo. Trincomalee has the potential to meet this demand, but its location far away from main east west sea route is the only disadvantage it possesses. Galle would facilitate this in future. With more and more emphasis given to improve the tourism sector, Galle to be developed as a tourism harbour with required facilities. Hambantota meant to be a hub of port facilities within easy access from major sea lane. Oil, water, provisions and crew changing are some of the facilities on the line.