

## **HISTORY OF SRI LANKA: THE IMPORTANCE OF CONNECTING OUR PAST WITH THE FUTURE**

K.W.M.S.W. Wanigasooriya

Intake 37-BSc in Strategic Studies and International Relations

### **Abstract**

*The history of a nation has many facets, and it could also be identified as a project of branding the name of that nation by its historians. Sri Lanka, with a longstanding history, culture, and splendid traditions bears evidence of human evolution that dates to at least 125,000 years. There is strong evidence of written records of important texts in the 1st Century AD with the writing of Tripitaka, the Buddhist doctrinal texts, launched at the Matale Alu Vihare by King Walagamba (103-77 B.C.). Sri Lanka's written history began in the 3rd to 4th Century AD in the form of the Deepawamsa shortly followed by the Mahawamsa in the 6th Century AD. Subsequently, there were many historical chronicles that were produced during different eras. These records reveal that throughout the history of Sri Lanka, the island has engaged with foreign nations in both trade and diplomacy. Trade has been a major part of ancient Sri Lanka's economic functions and has had a constant influence on the development and culture of the island nation. Diplomacy in ancient times - although not as prevalent in its modern form- had been a salient feature of Sri Lanka's historical record. Numerous world-famous travellers have highly praised Sri Lanka's serendipity, and their records vouch for the high-value brand image that Sri Lanka possessed throughout the past. However, the emergence of the terrorist conflict and its aftermath have created a substantial defame for the positive image of Sri Lanka in the recent past. These new narratives have created an unhealthy condition for the tourism and Foreign Direct Investments (FDI) sectors of the nation. This paper problematizes the anomalies of the brand image of pre-and post-conflict Sri Lanka. The author argues the importance of connecting the past with the future to create foresight to regain the image value of Sri Lanka. Since foresight work is all about anticipating and creating alternative futures, Sri Lanka can anticipate the emerging futures by understanding the trends in the historical record. According to the author, this will enable the country to think of possible probable and preferred futures. It is an upstream approach, executed by scanning the historical environment that is supposed to deliver better results.*

**Key Words:** *History, Serendipity, Narrative, Foresight*

### **INTRODUCTION**

History performs as a narrative and the story of a nation, this narrative creates the identity of a nation and its people. History has constantly been a source for conflict and debate, history as recorded is shrouded by conflict thus, history is a double-edged sword both as a means of peace and conflict. Moreover, history has also been used as a tool for political gain, thereby further appraising the power that history possesses in the making of the future.

Sri Lanka is a country with an expansive past dating back to over 125,000 years, and some of historical records dated back to the time of the Mahawamsa and Deepawamsa. Despite this rich history and rich past, however, Sri Lanka seems to have had a soft corner for conflict and a knack for not learning from its history. This has led Sri Lanka to a country riddled with conflicts and questionable policies.

'History repeats itself' is a common catchphrase, however despite being common; it is in fact a phrase with unwarranted meaning and depth. History is a means for change and a means for foresight. Through history, it is made possible to assess what could come however only to a certain degree. This being said, it is important to develop foresight education and the foresight framework in order to create new alternatives and avoid difficulties in the present and future.

Foresight, although a relatively modern concept has grown into a significant field of its own and has garnered importance throughout the years. Foresight is not to be mistaken with forecasting, the two differ in the sense that forecasting can predict the future with certainty such as with a weather forecast. Foresight utilizes similarities from what has happened to change the shape of what is to come, essentially it is a means for creating one's own future, on a grander scale in the future of a nation through the creation and provision of alternate futures.

Foresight is a tool that can be used to protect the future from the challenges. it is yet to face, especially the challenges of 'Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity' which has prevailed throughout history. Thus, through history foresight challenges the difficulties of the past, hence it is a concept of increasing interest not only for governments but for private sector entities as well, who have grown fond of foresight.

This paper discusses the importance of history through the lenses of foresight education, focusing on foresight and its connections to history. The paper is developed as such in order to provide knowledge into a field that is yet to be a staple within the curriculum. It will provide a concise and brief outlay of foresight education whilst drawing connection to the history of Sri Lanka. The research is written with the objective of introducing foresight education to the reader, and in doing so emphasizing the role and the importance of history within the foresight education.

## **HISTORY: A PROJECTION OF THE FUTURE**

The history of a nation comprises of many aspects, including the role of creating a unique identity to a nation. The history of any nation thus can be considered as the creator of the nation's brand image, and in Sri Lanka's case, a tourist hub to more recently a conflict-ridden, dystopian and developing world. Though Sri Lanka is all of the aforementioned, its people are known throughout the world for their hospitality, for their splendid traditions and culture aiding more to the favour of the islands brand image. Through this simple explanation it is clear that the history and background of a nation shape the image of the nation as well as the identity of its people.

Sri Lanka's history as briefed in the introduction to this paper is a vast and expansive history, and by history the author implies 'written history.' The island has a past of unrecorded heritage dating back 125,000 years, however as it is unrecorded, this past does not contribute to the development of foresight as it cannot be physically read and analysed.

Focusing on the written and recorded texts of Sri Lanka's history began 3<sup>rd</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> Century AD with initially the 'Deepawamsa' and then later the 'Mahawamsa' toward the 6<sup>th</sup> Century AD. Although these texts are considered to be the point where Sri Lanka's written history began, there has been strong evidence of written records of important texts in the form of the Tripitaka, the Buddhist doctrinal texts dating back to 1<sup>st</sup> Century AD launched at the Matale Alu Vihare by King Walagamba (103-77 BC). The Deepawamsa and Mahawamsa are the epitome of sources of Sri Lanka's history, apart from these, there are many other chronicles that have been published on Sri Lanka's history while further aiding the development of foresight especially with regard to foreign relations. Several of these chronicles discuss the relations that Sri Lanka has had throughout its history with foreign nations both in trade and diplomacy. They provide evidence that Sri Lanka has always been a trading hub in the region where many traders settled, the most significant being the Arabic traders who frequented the island. Thus, it is clear that trade played a key role within the development of the island nation as well as its culture.

Diplomacy although was not prevalent was also found to be present in Sri Lanka, the best example being the arrival of Arahata Mahinda Thero, who brought the Buddhism to the country, as well as the arrival of Sanghamitta Therii with the Sri Maha Bodhiya. A more common practice was the foreign relations built through betrothal to foreign

nations of native princesses, thereby it is made clear that diplomacy also had been an integral part of the islands history and plays an equally important role today.

This research problematizes the impact of the separatist conflict in shaping the image of Sri Lanka, as a result of which Sri Lanka has had to face severe consequences in terms of tourism and the receiving of foreign direct investments (FDI's). The paper further problematizes the anomalies of Sri Lanka's brand image prior to the conflict, highlighting the importance of connecting the past with Sri Lanka's future in rebuilding Sri Lanka's image. The author assesses that this will allow Sri Lanka to think of possible, probable and preferred futures. This may be an upstream approach. however, it is the alternative to a downstream approach of remaining stagnant.

## **THE FUTURE**

History as discussed goes far deeper than merely what is perceived; it is more far reaching than simply providing an identity to nations or individuals. History creates patterns that could delve into the future, the patterns are created through analysing what has happened, which instances have repeated and where do these patterns stand in the future. A simple example would be the repetitive wars waged throughout history, through the ideas gained by thinking ahead institutions such as the UN have been established, preventing calamities similar to World War I or II whichever the reader fancies more as an apt example.

The understanding, predicting and analysis of 'potential' futures (key word being potential as these are any alternatives that the choices taken could lead to, none of which are concrete futures) are key components that are necessary to prevent and adjust to possible calamities that could arise in the future. Hence implying that these components are capable of preventing wars at the scale of each of the World Wars.

Future studies and foresight education although are relatively newer concepts have grown steadily to useful skills that the modern world cannot do away with. These skills are essential to dealing with what is to come especially in a world that is constantly evolving and creating new futures. History has given the world, specifically Sri Lanka numerous lessons and new paths that the country could take, thereby it can be understood that history has equipped the nation with the tools to foresee what is to come, and take the necessary countermeasures.

Future studies are the study of probable, possible and preferred futures as well as the many myths and world views that surround it. Therefore, it is the analysis of the past

to derive what is to come. The world probable, possible and preferred futures signify the idea of addressing issues as a before-thought as opposed to an afterthought. These words further imply that the students of foresight are capable of shaping the future to a future that they envision and prefer to see as opposed to allowing haphazard decisions to shape the future. This implies the control that foresight has over controlling the difficulties that nations are faced with.

### **USED FUTURES**

Futurists work with a single-minded objective of transforming the future by using the future, how it has been imagined, how it has been thought of and understood. In doing this they are able to transform the present day which can alter the course of the future that had already been set.

Analysts, decision-makers and nations often discuss the future only if their realities are being disrupted, or they face challenges and or miss opportunities that can be benefitted from greatly. This is where foresight can be implemented effectively as foresight can be utilized to mitigate disruptions, present the difficulties before they have arrived at which point counter measures can be in place, and most importantly it will make clear the opportunities which should not be missed and ones which may be only of temporary gain to the nations.

Sri Lanka can be looked at upon through this lens when discussing Sri Lanka and China relations. Through foresight it could be assessed that the economic relations China and Sri Lanka share works in favour of Sri Lanka in terms of the long run, and may not look so in hindsight. The benefit Sri Lanka stands to gain through this may in fact be an opportunity that Sri Lanka cannot afford to pass up on, hence the heavy involvement of China. Although this may also not be the case when looking through the lenses of foresight the contrary seems farfetched.

The world is always has been unstable, a repetitive fact history makes clear to mankind. The world is constantly evolving and adapting to new conditions as such foresight too is also of growing in importance over used futures.

Those who do not adapt or change to the ever-evolving world fall into the used futures. Used futures are practices that people continue to pursue and continue to do regardless of their outcome. These practices may not make sense; they are dysfunctional and as such are not useful to foresight which is a strategy that utilizes

both analysis and prescription. Based on the analysis a prescription is provided to suit the challenge, thus providing solutions to a variety of issues through history.

### **FORESIGHT AND STRATEGIC FORESIGHT**

Foresight, as thoroughly discussed is a defence for the disruptions that could place, it is also in the firm opinion of the author a means to build from the history that is known. For Sri Lanka, a country that was once war torn which presently is in a developing and recovery phase in the post conflict foresight can be a valuable tool in assessing which avenues are more appealing to achieve its development agenda. Sri Lanka should benefit from foresight in order to prevent conflict similar to the separatist conflict or JVP riots.

Foresight is a tool that uses the assumed future to predict but a more in-depth look show that foresight utilizes this so as to create alternative futures that could prevent disruptions from taking place. Through its application futurist could begin to foresee what it is to come although it may not be similar to a forecast of what is to come, and once this is done it will be less of an ordeal to adapt to change and prevent disruptions. The world is constantly evolving, growing and changing, and similar to the world people, organizations, universities and governments too are constantly changing and evolving. The world has never been interconnected as it is today. Therefore, evolution is a given to survive in the modern world, if not they will fall short and be left behind never to recover. It is important to stay ahead of the competition in such a competitive world, as such foresight provides an opportunity to stay ahead, to stay in the future.

Strategic foresight revolves around decisions that are taking, the choice of moving upstream or downstream is crucial. The downstream path will not show progress whilst moving upstream utilizes foresight as tool in order to provide greater control over the future, providing an edge over the rest to face disruptions effectively or even to avoid them altogether.

Strategic foresight requires proactive thinking; this is a prerequisite for its application. The reality however is that most people, organizations, universities and governments are not trained to be proactive as a result they have been conditioned to be reactive. In strategic foresight it is imperative to be proactive if not expected result cannot be achieved and foresight cannot take place.

Proactive thinking as established is a cornerstone of strategic foresight, in order to be proactive, there are several requirements to fulfil. To be proactive one must first scan

the environment of the scenario they are facing, once this is done, they must look at alternate futures and scenarios. Having identified the alternate futures one must assess where it is, they want to be or where it is they would prefer to be, within that scenario.

In order to identify where one wants to be or prefer to be, it is imperative to know where it is, they come from, their origins. The knowledge of their origins allows them to find their purpose, thus purpose can only be found through their story, and in the context of this research Sri Lanka's story. The importance of history comes into play here with the main goal of finding a new story. Sri Lanka has to forge ahead to create a story that it wants to show the world, a story that attracts the rest towards Sri Lanka.

### **THE WAY FORWARD**

This paper has discussed repetitively the way forward which is to learn the lessons history has taught and to forge the future that Sri Lanka would want to see. It is imperative to learn from those lessons in order to understand the future the nation is to embark on.

Sri Lanka is a nation that has been blessed with many lessons throughout its history, lessons of both failure and victory, and of development and loss based on the decisions that were taken by previous leaders. Sri Lanka's history has unfailingly pointed out as a nation that has been the victim of constant conflict, both in the forms of domestic conflict and international conflict, reaching even to the modern day. The lesson to learn here is that it is imperative to build a secure nation, a nation that is capable of securing not only its security but also its future.

Diplomatic relations too have been a highlight of Sri Lanka's history and it is imperative that the island nation builds upon not only with nations that it has had historical ties with but also ones which it can build historical ties with. Sri Lanka should utilize the historical ties it has had in order to develop the future which it hopes to see, and these relations should act as a beacon for the future. However, the island should be alert to the exploitation of the relationships it has built as had once been the case with the colonizers.

The way forward is the future, the future is where history will once again come in to fruition and repeat itself. The past has presented decision makers, youth and the modern generation itself with many lessons to develop Sri Lanka to the pearl it is meant to be, and as history had once depicted a powerful nation in the Asian region.



Past conflict certainly has made the image of Sri Lanka murky, however these very issues that have created this murky image could be the launching pad to create a much clearer image of the nation. The task of clearing Sri Lanka's image rests with the youth, and importantly the equipping of youth with the skills of foresight which is the key to start think ahead and unlocking the future.

Sri Lanka has to move forward through the development of its brand image and more importantly through the development of its status within the international forum through foresight. This should be done in order to attract FDI's and tourism through which the country can begin to rejuvenate itself thereby addressing the problem of brand image posed by this research.

In conclusion, a history is a field that is underutilized; it is a field that is more than simply identifying a nation's identity but heritage. A history is a tool that can be utilized to build the future however one wants to see it. History is a tool that should be used in tandem with foresight, thereby striking a balance between the two to ensure the achievement of preferred outcomes.

Foresight, although a relatively a new field which is growing in its value and its importance. Foresight which utilizes history is capable of creating a future people yearn for. Foresight utilizes history in ways that it may not have been utilized, thus giving history a new purpose whilst creating alternative and previously unforeseen futures. Although foresight is not equivalent to forecasting which can accurately predict scenarios such as the weather it is capable of equipping decisions makers with the capacity to respond to calamities before they take place.

Finally, the objective of this research was to make aware the reader of the capacity of foresight, and also to open the mind of the reader to the importance of history within the spectrum of foresight education. The writer concludes that foresight education must not be neglected and should be incorporated into the education curriculum. It is a field with growing importance, and one which will have a critical role to play in the development of Sri Lanka's future. Thus, the youth must be made aware of the value of before thought as opposed to afterthought and in doing so Sri Lanka will be able to reach the heights it once resided at.



## REFERENCES

- Siriweera, W. (n.d) Ports in Ancient Sri Lanka. *Infolanka* [online]. Available from: <http://infolanka.com/org/srilanka/hist/hist12.html> [Accessed 10 June 2021].
- Somadeva, R. (2009) Sri Lanka in The Indian Ocean World: A Historical Appraisal. *ResearchGate*[online]. Available from: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323280423 Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean World- a historical appraisal](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/323280423_Sri_Lanka_in_the_Indian_Ocean_World-_a_historical_appraisal) [Accessed 10 June 2021].
- Perera, H. (2007) Buddhism in Sri Lanka: A Short History. *Access to Insight* [online]. Available from: <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/perera/wheel100.html> [Accessed 10 June 2021].
- Metafuture (2016) What Works in Future Studies (Part 1). *YouTube* [online]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTuIttajBOc> [Accessed 30 June 2021].
- Metafuture (2016) What Works in Future Studies (Part 2) – Foresight Work. *YouTube* [online]. Available from: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSme0\\_XZIWU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TSme0_XZIWU) [Accessed 30 June 2021].

### About the author



**Savindu Wanigasooriya** is currently a second-year undergraduate student, reading for the degree BSc in Strategic Studies and International Relations at the General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University, Rathmalana. He was previously enrolled at S.Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia where he completed his Primary and Secondary education and graduated following the G.C.E. A/Ls in the Arts stream.