

## THE DRIFT OF KINGDOMS IN POST-MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

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### **Abstract**

*The Sinhalese monarchy records its origins with the settling down of North-Indian Aryan immigrants on the island of Sri Lanka. According to records, the first Sinhalese kingdom was established by King Vijaya in the valley of Malvatu Oya. Later, the settlement grew and further developed into a kingdom during the reign of King Duttagamini transforming the Rajarata kingdom after King Pandukabhaya into a centre of administration. This study is aimed at identifying the decline of the ancient kingdoms in Rajarata- mainly the disintegration during the post-Polonnaruwa period. The researchers delve into the rationality of the views on various aspects of this decline as well as remarks by scholars. Several causes such as climatic change, collapse of the old order, the decline of agriculture due to infertility of soil, the ravages of malaria, threats from foreign invasions, the disintegration 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. This paper critically analyses the validity of those.*

**Keywords: Rajarata, Oriental despotism, Invasions**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Sri Lanka's recorded history commences with the arrival of Prince Vijaya in the 6th Century BC. Since then, there were successive waves of migrations -those seeking greener pastures, traders, craftsmen, missionaries, refugees, and outcasts- across the Palk straits such as princess Baddakachchana and Arahath Mahinda (233 BC). We should not forget that Prince Vijaya too was an outcast. During this period, various foreign groups with diverse cultural backgrounds settled in Sri Lanka. The first immigrants to Sri Lanka settled along the riverbanks of Malvatu Oya. These settlements were later developed as the kingdom of Anuradhapura. The agriculture-based civilization of Anuradhapura evolved mainly after the advent of Buddhism. Later, in the tenth and eleventh centuries, due to invasions by the South Indian Chola Empire, the administration was shifted from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa. The main centres of power, Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were located in the administrative heartland called 'Rajarata'. The thriving economy of agriculture based Rajarata was fed by the magnificent reservoir system. The notable factor here is that for nearly eighteen centuries political, economic, and social administration has been centred around Rajarata. Even today the archaeological remains of Rajarata amply

reveal a glorious civilization that flourished absorbing the core values of Buddhism and Hinduism. Towards the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, the ancient kingdom was heading into a period of turmoil. By the middle of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the great city of Anuradhapura had almost been abandoned and the kingdom of Polonnaruwa too had fallen (Paranavitana, 1971). The amazing hydraulic civilization of the Malvatu-Mahaveli had reached its end.

At the same time, the population of northern Sri Lanka increased, leading to the emergence of an independent Tamil kingdom on the Jaffna Peninsula in the last quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Along 1232 A.D. while Dambadeniya, Yapahuwa, Kurunegala became the capitals of the Sinhalese kingdom, their economic and cultural success can never be compared to that of Rajarata. The most powerful ruler of the time, Parakramabahu II, who defeated Magha, began to rebuild Polonnaruwa, but established his base in Dambadeniya. The area around Tuparama in Anuradhapura would have been in an arid desert when his son, Vijayabahu IV began the restoration of Stupas and other monuments. He travelled to Polonnaruwa and rebuilt it before heading to his capital, Dambadeniya and he assigned *Vanniyars* called forest chiefs for the protection of the city Anuradhapura. There are discussions about the reasons that led to the depopulation of Rajarata and the decline of Anuradhapura. The decline of monumental monastic complexes with the collapse of complex irrigation networks and the loss of technologies that helped the ancient Sri Lankans to build them such an advanced civilization is still controversial (Siriweera, 2012). This paper critically analyses the plausible reasons presented by historians on the decline of the Sinhala kingdom in the post-Polonnaruwa period.



Figure 1: The drift of Kingdoms to South West

Source: Author

Thus, the research identifies the rationality of causes such as climatic change, the collapse of the old order, the decline of agriculture due to degradation of soil, the spread of malaria, several foreign invasions, the breakdown of the even-handed administration, and complex social fabric which smoothly sustained the extensive irrigation system, and the attractions offered by the Wet Zone as against the Dry Zone which has been postulated by scholars.

### **THE NORTHERN AND SOUTH INDIAN INFLUENCE VS. THE DECLINE OF THE MEDIEVAL RAJARATA KINGDOM**

The close trade links between India and Sri Lanka are reflected in many ancient documents and point to the fact that the island was once inhabited by merchants. According to Professor Paranavitana, the population of the island is one of the main traders. The Kuveni episode reflects the uprising of immigrants against indigenous peoples and a synthesis of their cultures dominated by the superior culture of

migrants (Siriweera, 2012, p.19). Therefore, we could conclude that the same phenomenon was repeated subsequently at the Anuradhapura kingdom.

Although Sri Lanka maintained close cultural relations with northern India, the cultural influence of southern India predominates here. Not surprisingly, Hindu influences could be observed across Sri Lankan society since they made an impact on popular Buddhism. According to Siriweera, "some Buddhist kings too patronized Hinduism" (Siriweera, 2012, p.40). Despite its deep-rooted influence on Buddhism, it can be stated that Hinduism did not pose a severe threat to the stability of socio-cultural co-existence within the kingdoms. Simultaneously, there were frequent invasions carried out by powerful South Indian states which undermined the stability and affected the prosperity and security of the Sri Lankan state. Thus, this was an era during which territorial annexation and conquest, or direct political influences were achieved through armies marching across land or arriving by sea and confronting the opponent -face to face- in battle (Corgington, 1971, p. 10).

However, the South Indian invasions on the Island started with the usurping of the throne by Sena and Guttika, who were merchants engaged in the horse trade. During the reign of Mahinda V (982-1017 AD), Rajaraja I invaded Sri Lanka around the year 993 A.D. Therefore, King Mahinda V had to flee to the Rohana region while the son of Rajaraja I known as Rajendra I, carried away the plundered crown, jewels, the diadem and other valuables to India. This marked the demise of the Anuradhapura Kingdom which lasted for 11 centuries.

After capturing the City of Anuradhapura (1017 AD), Cholas moved the capital to Polonnaruwa, which they called Jayantha Mangalam, and marked the first step in transforming the Sinhalese kingdoms. Direct resistance from the Rohana region, which was located at the immediate south of the country, was there although the Chola inscriptions have mentioned that they surrendered the whole Island. It was a haven for rebels, and the origin of local uprisings against foreign leaders.

While the Cholas were able to gain the power over Rajarata region, several leaders organized stubborn resistance against them mainly from Rohana and occasional resistance from the central hill regions as well. Several regional leaders did not attempt to re-gain the power into their hands including the son of deposed king Mahinda V. However, Prince Kitti stands out as the only one who succeeded at his mission of unifying all Sinhala forces against Cholas and consolidating power in Polonnaruwa. During the Polonnaruwa period, only a few who ruled from the capital

could exercise their authority over the entire Sri Lanka. Except for Vijayabahu I (1070-1110), Parakramabahu I (1153-1186), and Nissankamalla (1187-1196) the rest were rulers whose territorial dominance was restricted mainly to the Rajarata part of the Dry Zone.

It can be said that foreign invasions played a crucial role, and they were a devastating blow to the decline of the medieval hydraulic civilization within the country. Foreign invasions are not an unknown threat in Sri Lankan history, but on this particular occasion, it is quite arguable the fact that which invasion led to the demise of the Rajarata civilization. Especially when the Cholas invaders took control of the Anuradhapura kingdom from around 993 and established their rule in 1017 - the Sinhalese fought decisively to regain control over the lost kingdom. For example, Vijayabahu I (1070-1110), who successfully defeated the Chola, ruled over the newly situated centre for power Polonnaruwa, for forty years. Parakramabahu I (1153-1186) made the country unprecedentedly successful. Kalinga Magha, who ascended the throne after Polonnaruwa in 1215, wreaked havoc across the country, plundered the treasures and terrorized the populace (Indrapala, 1971).

Despoliation by Magha though in many ways similar to the earlier invasions of the island, it appears as one of the key factors which altered the functioning of the island. The existing situation at some stage after his oppressive reign hastened the neglect of the tremendous reservoirs and its subsequent radial canals. This may additionally have resulted in barren lands and horrible yields that may hardly sustain the populace. Not only the economy but the cultural and spiritual aspects also were not spared with the razing to the ground of temples and other religious monuments in Polonnaruwa. According to Siriweera, the remains of the palace of Parakramabahu I Vijayantha Pasada were ravaged by fire. "The remains of the walls of the upper story suggest that the palace had been burnt at some point in time. Moreover, Charcoal from burnt timber has also been found in this location (Siriweera, 2012, p.69). The account of the Pujavaliya and Culavamsa may be somewhat exaggerated in describing its context. But even in the Tamil resources such as the "Mattakkalappu- Manmiyam" mentions that "Magha" has caused the destructions of all the Buddhist Viharas and Buddhist temples located at Polonnaruwa (Indrapala, 1971). Moreover, he allocated the monasteries, Pirivena's, and plenty of sanctuaries to his soldiers as residing place as a form of desecrating the sanctity of such places. According to the Culavamsa and other resources, Magha and his warriors have taken away all the possessions of the

rich people. They have further stated that the soldiers of Magha appeared to have seized villages, fields, gardens, slaves, cattle, buffaloes, and whatever they could acquire and brought them back to Kerala. The events that followed Magha's rule are different from the circumstances that prevailed when the Cholas were expelled by Vijayabahu I. Once the Cholas were repulsed, the Sinhala rulers were free to consolidate their authority in Rajarata while keeping Polonnaruwa as there were no similar attacks each from the Cholas or any other foreign power. Magha's influence was a drastic strike on the core of the Rajarata civilization which is the Sinhala Buddhist socio-economic structure.

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 mercenaries from South India. Around 1258 A.D. The Pandyan King Jayavarman Sundara Pandya attacked him and levied tribute. Since Chandrabhanu had firmly established himself in northern parts of the island, he defied the Pandyas and as a result, in 1263 A.D. Jayavarman Virapandya invaded his kingdom, killed him, and placed a son of Chandrabhanu -who submitted to the authority of the Pandyas- on the throne of the northern kingdom. Thus, the Pandyas established their mastery in northern Sri Lanka (Indrapala, 1971, p.86). This event marks the beginning of the Tamil kingdom of Jaffna and for several decades thereafter there were two kingdoms in the island. The Sinhalese kingdom controlled the southern and central parts of the island, and 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 Southwest as there was an equally powerful kingdom close by.

In fact, the Sinhalese retreated further and further into the hills of the wet zone, especially to the South and West. Both Sinhalese and Tamil rulers most likely used the region around Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa as a buffer zone between the two kingdoms. As a result, the administrative and social organization in these areas would have been disturbed. Thus, these settlements became isolated, and isolation paved the way for stagnation (Codrington, 1960, p.93-103).

These chieftains theoretically acknowledge the overlordship of either the Tamil or Sinhalese king, but except in one or two rare instances, for all practical purposes were independent. The disunited Vanni chieftains dispersed throughout the dry zone were unable to effectively coordinate the labour force needed to sustain the reservoir system and its intricately linked canal system. When the chain system of anicuts, channels and reservoirs was neglected the ruin was speedy and inevitable.

### **COLLAPSE OF 'OLD ORDER'**

The American geographer and historian of Asia, Rhoads Murphey views that the collapse of 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. (Siriweera, 2012, p.71). Murphey, adopting Karl Wittfogel's idea of 'oriental despotism,' suggests that only a high degree of organization and a large labour force will function the irrigation works and provide constant maintenance.

He also emphasizes that the old society's "Rajakariya" idea was vital in achieving a centralized administration of a despotic kind. In his view, the collapse and total disintegration of 'Rajakariya' and central authority had absolute control of human resources which adequately explain the abandonment. (Murphey, 1957, p.186).

R.A.L.H. Gunawardena, contrarily has rejected the notion that ancient Sri Lankan society suits Wittfogel's idea of oriental despotism. He claims that it was multi-centred, with monastic complexes and village level organizations playing a role in the building and maintenance of irrigation works in addition to the king. (Gunawardena, 1971, pp.3-27). For example, the colloquially known, "*vevai dagabai gamai pansalai*" where the concept of the tank, the dagaba (symbolizing the Buddhist ethos) and the village; three village level institutions intertwined and supporting one another; the tank symbolizing the material needs and the temple providing the spiritual and educational needs for the community.

Even when the central authority weakened, the 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 Polonnaruwa 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-centred administrative apparatus sustained the irrigation network. Not all kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa were strong, but the 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 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. (Siriweera, 2012, p.72).

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 weakening of the Polonnaruwa kingdom would have undoubtedly aided Magha in establishing his authority in Rajarata, but once Magha's hand was withdrawn, the Sinhalese were unable to reoccupy strong Rajarata and retain the reservoir system and magnificent buildings built by their forefathers. After all, the drain on manpower and material capital is not exclusive to the Polonnaruwa kingdom. Mahinda, the last of the Anuradhapura kings, did not even have enough money to pay his troops. Thus, the causes for the decline of the Rajarata civilizations and the abandonment Dry Zone regions other than the Jaffna peninsula have to sort from elsewhere.



## **CLIMATIC CHANGES**

Rhoads Murphey stated climatic change as the main reason behind the abandonment of the Dry Zone areas, with many scholars accepting the view of Murphey's. According to him dry zone droughts occurring annually are indeed terrible and harsh, and had occurred at longer intervals of 10, 30 or 100 years throughout the ancient period' as the Mahavamsa mentions them repeatedly. (Murphey,1975, pp. 181-200). But it is also to be noted that there is no reference to droughts or famines in any chronicle for more than six centuries 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. (Murphey, 1975, pp. 181-200). This also suggests that the climate in the area now known as the dry zone was more hospitable during the Rajarata civilization's reign than it was in the 16<sup>th</sup> century A.D. During the reigns of Parakramabahu II and Bhuvanekabahu, the 13<sup>th</sup> century also saw two famines and droughts, at least one of which may have been caused by 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. (Cooray, 1948, pp.39-42).

### **SPREAD OF MALARIA**

The spread of malaria being a cause for the decline and abandonment of the Rajarata civilization is a debatable point. (Siriweera, 2012, p.68). There is very little data on the source and spread of malaria in the global sense, though some authors assumed that it was virulent in the Mediterranean region as well as in Han region, China (Nicholls, 1935, pp-11-13). 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. (Siriweera, 2012, p.68)

### **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. Therefore the thriving economy of agriculture based Rajarata was fed by the reservoir system even today the archaeological remains of Rajarata amply reveal a magnificent civilization that flourished by the core values of Buddhism and Hinduism which flourished in the dry zone of Sri-Lanka from the latter half of the first millennium B.C to the thirteenth century and the subsequent shift of the centres of population and administration to the wet zone in the southwestern portions of the island have been summarized and synthesized in this research.

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