Chapter One

Geographical features and Concise History of Sri Lanka

1.1 An Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island, a nature’s gift, which is located in the Indian Ocean and separated from the Indian main land by a narrow band of sea water called the Palk Strait. In ancient times the country was known by several names such as Lanka dipa, Tambapanni, Sihala divpa, Sinhala-dvipa, Hsia-lan shan, Sarandib, Sylen... etc\(^1\).

Apart from that, in the ancient times it was known as Ceylon to other nations. The Greeks and Romans called the island Taprobane. Some historians have mentioned that this name is a corruption of the word “Tamba-Panni” (Copper colored Palm) mentioned in Mahawamsa. The Arabs called the island “Serendib” and the Portuguese “Ceilao”. Pelisimundu was another name for this island which appears in the Arthasastra by Kautilya\(^2\). Most of the above mentioned names of Ceylon were taken from famous English and Scottish names of places. The scenic and natural beauty of this small island is still implied by the term “Pearl of the Orient” or the “Pearl of the Indian Ocean”.

Sri Lanka is a center for Buddhism in the South Asian region and is famous as “Dhammadipa” for protecting the Theravada tradition of Buddhism.

In historical records, Sri Lanka has been recognized as a trading center for gems, ivory, peacocks, elephants and a variety of spices to the eastern and western traders. It is also famous for being a naval base on the sea routes between the Arabian lands to South East Asia, as well as, the significant stoppage on the ancient Silk Road\(^3\).
The capital city of the Sri Lanka is Colombo whereas Kandy is the hill capital, which is surrounded by mountains. The temple of the tooth relic of the Lord Buddha is situated in Kandy and therefore, the city has been known as a world heritage city by the UNESCO.

There are four main ethnic groups in Sri Lanka which are **Sinhalese, Tamils, Muslims** and the **Burgers**. The ratio of the population of this island can be identified as Sinhala (74%), out of whom nearly 69.35% are Buddhist, Tamil population is 12.6%, the Moors are 7.1% and others are Burghers.

Traditionally, Sri Lanka is an agricultural country. Many paddy fields can be seen in the lowlands and the high lands as well. The terraced rice fields also can be seen especially in hilly regions. Chena cultivation is being done by farmers in rural areas. The country is renowned for its production and exports of tea, rubber, coconut and spices.

Even though Sri Lanka was known as Ceylon until 1972, it was officially rechristened as “Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka” after gaining independence on 04th February 1948. It is a unitary state which is governed by a Semi- Presidential system.

### 1.2 Geographical Features of Sri Lanka

Geographically, Sri Lanka is an Island, situated very close to the Indian mainland, and is surrounded by the Indian Ocean. It is separated by a narrow sea bed or channel, named the “Palk Strait”.

Sri Lanka is a tropical country which is located closer to the equator. The geographical location of this island is latitude 5.55’ to 9.51’ and longitude 79.41’ to 81.53’ east. The breadth of the country is 140 miles and the length is 270 miles. The total area is 65,610 square kilometers (25,332 square miles). 64,740 square kilometers of which is land and 870 kilometers is water. Its coastline is 1,340 km long. The topography of the island can
be divided into three main geographical areas as: plains, the central hills and the coastal belts.

The geological structure of the island consists of Achaean, Jurassic, Miocene, Pliocene, Pleistocene and recent residual and alluvial deposits. The rocks of Miocene can be seen under the Jaffna peninsula (Jaffna is the capital city of Northern Province) and Minihagalkanda. It is believed that the Tabbowa beds contain the development of the rocks of the Jurassic area.

The average temperature of Colombo varies between 51.3°F minimum and 86.0°F maximum. It is situated close to the sea level and the high land, Nuwaraeliya is situated at a height of over 5000 feet above the sea level, with an average temperature of 10.8°F.

According to its climatic features, the country is divided into two main zones: the dry zone and the wet zone. As the land with thick forests belongs to the wet zone, it controls the moisture and the rainfall pattern during the year. The “Sinharaja Adaviya”, a narrow strip of forest is also known as “virgin tropical rain forest” in Sri Lanka. This forest stretches 30 miles and lies in the Sabaragamuwa province. There exist precious and extremely valuable flora and fauna in this rain forest. The dry zone comprises of South East, East and Northern parts of the country. These lands cover thick bushy type trees which have thick leaves.

The annual rain fall pattern is also varied. Monsoon rainfall happens between May and September in the South West and in October - November in the North East provinces. The Island receives a maximum rain fall of 5459 mm at Watawala which is in the hill region and minimum of 966 mm at Manner which is very close to the Jaffna peninsula.
The *Pidurutalagala* is the highest mountain in Sri Lanka, with 8292 feet in height. The other peaks are *Kirigalpotta* (7857 feet), *Kolapatanahela* (7754 feet), *Totapola* (7741 feet) and the *Smanala* is (7300 in feet) height.

Apart from that, there are many rivers and picturesque waterfalls adding to the natural beauty of the country. The longest river is *Mahaweli* which flows eastwards and culminates in the sea in *Trincomalise*, a port city in the Eastern province. The rivers *Kelani* and the *kalu* flow westwards and the river *Walawe* flows southwards to the sea. The most scenic waterfalls are the *Diyaluma* (560 feet), the *Lakshapana* (377 feet), the *Aberdeen* (296 feet), the *Devon* (281 feet), and the *Dunhinda* (190 feet).

A number of hot water springs are found in the Eastern, Southern and Northern parts of Sri Lanka. The most famous of them is located in *Kanniyai* in *Trincomalee* district, a major city in the Eastern province. Others are situated in Down South. Although there are many water springs in Sri Lanka. The most specific feature of Sri Lanka is that it is free from any volcanic activities.

### 1.3 A Concise History of Sri Lanka

Even though Sri Lanka has an extensive history which is enveloped with incredible fables and mythical legends, it is however, the history of the island extends to the pre-historic ages. The historical records prove that the pre-history of the island goes back to 30,000 years and the modern archeological excavations have revealed that it was inhabited by mankind at that time also. The recorded history begins with the arrival of Aryans in the 6th century B.C. from India. Prior to the arrival of Aryans, this island has said to be inhabited by *Yakkhas* and *Nagas* as follows:

“…*Vijaya* came to him and asked ' Which land is this, sir?' The island of *Lanka*/ he answered. There are no men here, and here no dangers will arise.
And when he had spoken so and sprinkled water on them from his water-vessel, and had wound a thread about their hands he vanished through the air.
And there appeared, in the form of a bitch, a yakkhim who was an attendant of (Kuvanna)⁶

_Mahawansha_, the great chronicle of Sri Lanka written in the 6th century A.D. describes that these two groups were non-human beings, but modern historians argue that they could be the aborigines of the country. Ramachandra Dikshitar⁷ in his book “Pre historic South India” has points out that the Yakkas (according to the Mahawansa, Kuveni was a Yakka prince who was married to Vijaya is said to be the first Sri Lankan king arrived from India in 6th century A.D.) were supposed to be hilly tribes with war – like aggressive attributes and the Nagas were the people of a Sea faring, living in low lands and river deltas.

On the basis of the above sources, it can be presumed that they were the tribes who inhabited Sri Lanka. Furthermore, there have been many kings of the Naga clan who ruled the country. The pre-history of Sri Lanka implies that there were three Naga seets located near the island: Maha-Samudura Naga Bhavana ruled by Culodara, Wadunnagala Naga Bhavana ruled by Mahodara and Kelani Naga Bhavana ruled by Maniakkhika Naga⁸.

The Buddhists believe that the “Gautama Buddha” had visited Ceylon three times and instructed the inhabitants, and that he had left his footprint on Adam’s Peak (the Hindus claim that this footprint is of Siva whereas the Muslims believe that it is of Adam) on request of god Sumana Saman.

The earliest tradition and relationship between India and Ceylon has been mentioned in “Skanda Purana” and the “Ramayana by Valmiki” (cited by Arunachalam) as follows:
Skanda Purana:

“The story of the rise and fall of a mighty and wicked Titan, for whose overthrow Skanda or Kartikeya, the god of war and wisdom, was incarnated. The ethos of that content live in a remote forest shrine in the south-eastern corner of the island, called after him Kartikeya Grama or kataragama, where, after his victory, he wooed and won a chieftain’s daughter, who shares with him the worship of millions from Cashmere to Ceylon, and with whom the Sinhalese priests of the shrine proudly claim kingship…”

The epic Ramayana of Valmiki is the story of abduction of Sita by King Ravana which depicts the relationship between India and Ceylon as follows:

“The abduction of Sita, a North Indian queen, by Ravana, king of Ceylon, the invasion of Ceylon by her husband, Rama, and her recovery after sanguinary war and the slaughter of Ravana. The bridge said to have been constructed for the passage of Rama’s army to Ceylon is the Adam’s Bridge of English maps. It touches the Island of Rameswaram, where on his return from Ceylon…”

It may be mentioned here that most recently the American NASA center has published a satellite picture which also proves that there was a bridge from South India to Ceylon.

It is believed that the recorded history of the country and that of the people of Sinhalese originated from the Aryan clan. According to the Mahawamsa, the Aryan king Vijaya and his seven hundred followers had arrived Sri Lanka in the 6th century B.C. Furthermore, the author of the Mahawamsa has extended this legend up to the marriage of Vijaya and Kuweni who is said to be a yakka prince. It seems to be that this story was a fabrication of the author of Mahawamsa.
The Greatest religious, cultural and social event marked in Ceylon history is the introduction of Buddhism in the 3rd Century B.C. Buddhism was brought here by Rev. Mahinda, the son of King Ashoka, the greatest emperor of India, by the invitation of the king Devammapiyatissa who ruled the country after the king Pandukhabhaya. In the same era, the “Sacred Bo-Sapling” was brought to the island by the Buddhist nun Sanghamitta, the daughter of the King Ashoka. Not only the natives but also the king embraced Buddhism as a part of local lives. It is believed that there were sixteen artisan families of Painters, Craftsmen and musicians… etc. who came here as duty suppliers for the Bo-sapling. The living pattern of natives, culture, agriculture, art and craft, architecture and language developed under the Buddhist teaching. In this era, Ceylon rose gradually to a high status of prosperity and civilization. Architectural buildings and sthupas depict the prosperity of economy and rich cultural wealth of this period even today.

In the same era the Island was divided into three main regions like Ruhunu, Maya, Pihiti. The above mentioned city of royal capital comprising the whole region to the north of the river Mahaveli belonged to the Pihiti-rata. The Ruhunu rata bounded on the east and south by the sea and on the North and West by the river Mahaveli and river Kalu, and including the mountain zone to which the land rose from the sea-coast, and the Maya rata was situated in between the Deduru oya and river Kalu, the western sea and the mountain ranges and the river Mahaveli on the East.

Since the political and economic upheavals and adversary invasions, the capital of the Island was transferred place to place and time to time. Because of the invasion by the South Indian emperor Raja Raja Chola in 993 B.C., Polonnaruwa replaced Anuradhapura as the second capital city of Sri Lanka from 11th A.D. to 13th A.D. and Vijayabhahu-I became the king of Polonnaruwa by defeating the Pandyan king who ruled Anuradhapura.
Under Prakramabhahu (1153 A.D. to 1186 A.D.), who was known as the greatest king in this period, Hinduism enjoyed free worship and received royal patronage. In that era, many hindustic Bramin practices had to be absorbed into the main religion. The architectural monuments of this era clearly depicted the so called influences.

The king has built many tanks (the biggest one is the Parakrama Samudra), canals and irrigation systems during his time. Although he died in 1186 A.D., power of the Cholas of South India had extended 70 years furthermore. After the Polonnaruwa, the capital city of Sri Lanka shifted consequently to Dambadeniya (1232 A.D. to 1270 A.D), Yapahuwa (1272 A.D. to 1300 A.D.), Kurunegala (1292 A.D to 1326 A.D.), Gampola (1341 A.D. to 1415 A.D.), Kotte (1415 A.D. to 1514 A.D.) and Finally, to Kandy (1514 A.D. to 1815 A.D.). Kandy was the last capital city of Sri Lanka.

In 1505, Sri Lanka was colonized by the Portuguese and the coastal region of low-country swayed under their reign for about 150 years (1505 to 1656). To convert non-Christian natives to Roman Catholicism, which was the main religion of the Portuguese, and to capture the major share of spice market were the main objectives behind this event. Dutch took over the country in 1602, followed by the British in 1805. Even though the Dutch did not give much attention to propagate Protestantism as their religion, they tried to capture the monopoly of the spice market in Sri Lanka. However, at last, the British took over the whole country under their rule in 1815. As a result, the kingship was abolished and Sri Lanka became a colony of the British. They introduced Christianity which still survives as an independent religious entity in this Island and also, they introduced English Missionary education system in Sri Lanka. The cultures of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British have deeply influenced the native cultures including languages, art, music and architecture of Sri Lanka.

In 1948, Sri Lankans became independent from the British rule after a long term and difficult attempt full of a number of instances of political struggles. Both Sinhalese and
Tamils stood as a united nation in order to achieve this goal. Since then, Sri Lanka has been a democratic Republic, governed by the elected government and has emerged as a growing economy based on tourism and exports of tea and various other products. It has developed culturally and economically and has attained an honorable position globally as a fast growing independent nation.

1 Wijesekera, *The Sinhalese*, 01.

2 Arunachalam, *Sketches of Ceylon History*, 04

3 Ariyapala, *Society in Mediaeval Ceylon*, 01 – 02.


5 Ibid., 05.

6 *Mahavamsa*, 56.

7 Dikshitar, *Pre-Historic South India*, 43.


9 Arunachalam, *Sketches of Ceylon History*, 04.

10 Ibid.

11 *Mahavamsa*, 60.

12 Ibid., 88-113.

13 Arunachalam, *Sketches of Ceylon History*, 11.