

**Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean around 15<sup>th</sup> Century A. D.****Dr. Rohitha Dasanayaka B.A. M.S.Sc. Ph.D****Head****Department of History****University of Peradeniya****Sri Lanka**

Some of the commodities traded in the ancient commercial system of Asian civilization were silk, cotton, glass, cut and polished gems, conch shells, ivory, horses, pearls etc. These commodities were exchanged through the east-west trade along sea routes and through the silk road over the land. Some special items were also available in some regions and they were silver from Japan, silk, perfumes and gold from China, pearls, gems, spices, elephants and ivory from Sri Lanka, opium, indigo and cotton yarns from Gujarat in India, cloves, nut-meg and cardamom from Malacca and Borneo, gold and slaves from North African costal regions, and red carpets and horses from Arabia. These were the important commodities, traded in international commerce prior to the colonial era.

These commodities and products of various countries were an index to their economic system and traditional way of life style and strength in respect of wealth. Some commodities were in great demand and the regions producing such items had special characteristics. The circulation rate of the different items depended on the taste and demand of the people living in those regions, and according to the changes in their social habits. To give an

example, south eastern Buddhist and Hindu temples required conch shells, incense, candles, images of Gods and the Buddha, and hence they were in much demand. According to the Galle trilingual slab inscription, the Chinese emperor offered the above items to the temples of Adam's Peak<sup>1</sup> and God Upulvan at Devinuwara.<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century, more items were added to the list of commodities, and there was a trend of some old commodities losing their value. But still they continued in trade. Andre Gunder Frank, an economist specializing on world trade, has shown that in the Asian region, more and more commodities from Asia were exported to Europe, but no corresponding increase in imports from Europe to Asian region could be noticed. Even today the position is more or less the same.<sup>3</sup>

The main commodities circulated in the commerce and trading network were in large number and they were: silk, cotton textiles, valuable gems, cut and polished precious stones, silver, pepper and other spices, rice, dye, indigo, ivory, shawls, blankets, gumlace, gun powder, salt, iron, steel

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<sup>1</sup>. Luciano Perecht, "Some Chinese Texts Concerning Ceylon", **The Ceylon Historical Journal**, Vol. III, Nos. 3&4, 1954, pp. 207-210; "The Galle Trilingual Inscription", Chinese version edited in Joseph Needham, **Science and Civilization of China**, Vol. IV, Pt. III, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 532

<sup>2</sup>. E.W. Perera, "The Galle Trilingual Stone", **Spolia Zeylanica**, Vol. VIII, p. 122; S. Paranavitana, "The Tamil Inscription on the Galle Trilingual Slab", **Epigraphia Zeylanica being Lithic and Other Inscription of Ceylon**, (ed.), D.M. de Z. Wickramasinge, Vol. III, 1928-1933, Asian Educational Services, (New Delhi, Madras, 1994) , pp. 331-341

<sup>3</sup>. Andre Gunder Frank, **Re-orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age**, University of California Press, (Los Angelis, 1998)

products, earthenware, timber, glass, sulphur, grains, oil, ship building material, cured leather, wool fiber, minerals (graphite, iron), horses, carpets, pearls, fruits, dates, dye woods, aromatics, incense, tobacco, salt, fish, coffee, wine, weapons, corals, rose water, tea, pearls, sugar, pharmaceuticals, camels, etc. Elephants, tin, copper, cinnamon, slaves, diamonds, mercury, birds' nets, Ambegrows (aromatics found in sprats), amber, jaggery, jasper, cutch, skin of deer and tigers, betel nut, shark fins, decorated earthen pots, lacquer ware, zinc powder, rhubarb, satin, velvet, sappan wood etc. were the other items of trade.<sup>4</sup>

According to the taste and demand of the customers the value of the items were determined in the Indian sub-continent and the Arab world. When food habits improved, there was a high demand for cloves, nut-meg, cardamom and other spices produced in South Asian countries. Not only aristocracy but even common people included those spices in their meals. Spices would not grow in the Persian Gulf region and around the Red Sea, and therefore, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia exported those spices. There was a big demand for hot spices among the Chinese but they never used spices like nutmeg and cloves. There was no special reason for using pepper in their meals, and the Chinese had a liking for birds' nests (edible birds' nests) and sea slugs. Such nests were exported to China from islands called Aru of the Ceram Sea in Nueginiya. They were soft and the Chinese relished eating them. All powerful countries in the Asian region participated in the sea trade exchanging these commodities. There was no or minimum monopolies of that trade. The costs of items and the security of merchants

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<sup>4</sup> **Ibid.**, pp. 80-105

were considered as team work, and all co-operated in long term planning of their trade activities.

There were three basic factors that governed the trading system. Some regions had technology and they did not want others to benefit from their knowledge. Some commodities had special regional production (those were not produced in other regions) and this was of course due to geographical factors like land, water, climate, monsoon etc. Although demand and relative cost were there, social preferences, desire for luxury items too decided the prices.

During the period A.D.1360 to 1370 there was an expansion of Vijayanagar power of India, and under King Parakramabahu VI (A.D.1412-1467) the Kotte Kingdom was established strongly in Sri Lanka. In the same period, the power and strength of Ariya Chakravarti of Jaffna diminished. He could not defy the Emperor of Vijayanagar, and had to obey and carryout all his commands. Due to the political weakness of their trading opponents of Jaffna, the Muslim community was able to capture the trade and commerce in the entire country. But they achieved this feat peacefully. There was another change that occurred in the sub-continent during the second half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The Baghdad empire was falling down, and as a result, the commercial activities of the Arabs got reduced to a certain level. Yet, Arab merchant navigators continued trading in the western part of the Indian Ocean successfully. However, the eastern part the commerce and trade fell into the hands of the Muslim population of Arab descent. Hindu merchants traded in the land and all their commodities were exported by ships that belonged to the Muslims. Due to religious taboos, Hindus of

higher castes were not allowed foreign travel. If they happened to visit other countries they had to undergo purifying traditional rituals before absorbing into the social status. They were prohibited to have relations with Muslims or even Europeans, and to sail in their ships was a taboo.

Islam's promise of equality without any caste or social distinction attracted those who wanted to change their religion. As a result, early Arab settlements were established firmly. The navigators involved in sea-trade never were or very rarely accompanied by their family members. They had determination and accordingly kept their women-folk confined to their home; they selected women as their wives from the lands they visited, and settled down with them converting the whole family to Islam. Hence, there was a rapid increase in the Muslim population. Therefore, those who got converted to the Muslim religion were in native Arab settlements and possessed greater man power and social status and wealth. In this manner the Muslim population increased rapidly along the western and eastern coastal areas of India, and spread the process of conversion up to Tripoli and Morocco. All the Muslims with a commercial background settled down peacefully and successfully along the coastal regions of India converting them into main trading centres without any battle, and they annexed all that land unto themselves. They were able to buy anything easily for money and were even politically strong. Because of this, local kings respected and safeguarded them. In short, the Muslims brought everything the kings wanted and paid the maximum price for local commodities. Lorna Devaraja points out, this development and states that just like the kings of Sri Lanka,

South Indian kings were also able to utilize the abilities of the Muslims for their own benefit.<sup>5</sup>

During that period, the Alakeshvara family, with their wealth, power and strength developed through commerce and trade, was able to challenge the Gampola kingdom. Kotte became the capital of Sinhalese rulers when Parakramabahu VI became the king. He was able to spread his authority throughout the country. At the same time by his great strength and will, he was able to control the foreign trade of the country as a whole. He had his own merchant ships. The *Rajāvaliya*<sup>6</sup> states that Sri Lankan ships sent to South India for trade were robbed, and Parakramabahu VI retaliated by sending warships to attack the port of *Ativirarama Pattana* (Adriampet-Adhiramapattanam in Tanjore District)<sup>7</sup>. Counter claims are made by Vijayanagara rulers to victories in Sri Lanka.<sup>8</sup> The rulers of Vijayanagar by

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5. Lorna Devaraja, “*Muslim Merchants and Pilgrims in Sarandib C.900-1500 A.D.*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 196-197

6. *Rajāvaliya*, (trans.), B. Gunasekara, (Publisher not given), (Colombo, 1900), p. 48

7. Most of the sailings from here were to Sri Lanka, Malabar and Thirunelveli coasts. Rice and textile were the chief exports, and areca and timber were the imports. Fish, dry fish, salt, provisions and grains were the commodities in coastal trade. The other minor ports in the Thanjavur coast were used by the native traders for coastal trade with Sri Lanka at this time.

8. According to Tamil and Arabic sources, Vijayanagar emperor invaded several times Sri Lanka before the reign of Parakramabahu VI- The Alampundi plates of Virupaksha, the son of Harhara II, the Vijayanagar emperor, mention that he invaded Sri Lanka in A.D. 1385, and brought in large booties to his father in the shape of precious stones, crystals, semi-precious stones and jewels. (**Epigraphia Indica**, Vol. III, p. 228 quoted by Jayaseela Stephen, **op.cit.**, p. 25) Narayani Vilasam, a contemporary literary work, mentions that Harihara II erected a pillar of victory in the island of Sri Lanka (S. Krishnaswamy Ayyangar, **Sources of Vijayanagar History**, Asian Educational Services, (New Delhi, 1986, p. 53). So impressive was the reign of Vijayanagar kings that the ruler of Sri Lanka was compelled to send his envoy to the Vijayanagar court in 1378 according to Ferishta, the Muslim chronicler. Rich presents came from the court of Sri Lanka to the Vijayanagar emperor annually. (Robert Sewell, **A Forgotten Empire, (Vijayanagar) A Contribution to the History of**

involving themselves in Sri Lankan politics, created political confusion in Sri Lanka against Sinhala ruler. These events make it clear that Sri Lanka once again took initiative in matters relating to foreign trade.

It is clear from these facts that Sri Lanka became a force to reckon with in international trade and commerce. What Lorna Devaraja says about Indian kings may be true, but this is not true in the case of the Sri Lankan kings; they did not directly involve themselves in trade but they made use of Muslim merchants for enhancing their profit from trade and commerce. Thus, Sri Lankan rulers captured and held the Jaffna peninsula for more than half a century and the whole coastal area for commerce and trade was managed entirely by their own coastal power. That was the period when the Sinhalese kings and rulers developed navigational technology, and even managed to centralize the facilities for trading in the Far East up to China. Though the control of trade by Sri Lankan king was a challenge for Arab Muslim traders in Sri Lanka that did not mean that Muslims were out of that trade. The knowledge and experience they had obtained through their traditional way had always been utilized by them to win the hearts of Sinhala rulers.

However, after the 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Muslims were able to take over the commerce and trade by themselves and their settlements increased

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**India**, George Allen & Unwin Limited, (London, 1962, p. 46) We can note that even in the period of Parakramabahu VI, the Vijayanagar emperor Devaraya II (1422-1446 ) invaded Sri Lanka; Fernao Nuniz, the Portuguese traveller, also confirms that the rulers of Sri Lanka paid tributes to Devaraya II. This is corroborated by an inscription found at Nagar in Chingleput area where it is recorded that Devaraya II received a tribute from Sri Lanka (Jayaseela Stephen, **op.cit.**, p. 25 and see details in N. Venkata Ramanayya, **Studies in the History of the Third Dynasty of Vijayanagara**, Gian Publishing House, (Delhi, 1986), pp. 141, 286, and 450-452) But it is not clear whether they invaded the territory of Sinhala ruler or Ariya Chakravarti.

rapidly and were established firmly along the coastal regions. The most important point here is that although Muslim population increased and their settlements spread up to the south and far eastern islands of the archipelago during the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Sri Lanka remained an exception since vigorous spread of Islam was not very much manifest there. Thus Sri Lanka was not included in their massive expansion and large empire.

Regarding the Muslim population in Sri Lanka and the Malabar region of India, M.A.M. Shukri<sup>9</sup> points out that they arrived from Yemen and Hadramauth, and formed a significant part of the population. The main reason for that was trade relation on the one hand, and on the other hand the Muslims shared the cultural and social norms of the country adopted. There are many archaeological evidences to prove that. From the very early periods, the Arabs were present in Malabar and in its coastal regions, forming Muslim settlements or colonies. Principal evidence in support of this comes from the village Kayal Pattanam in the district of Tirunelveli in India. Many Arabic coins have been discovered in that region.<sup>10</sup>

During the 13<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, Southern Malabar and North Western Malabar developed successful trade relations with the Muslim world. As stated earlier, during that period there was a group of merchants called Karamis,<sup>11</sup> who were famous sea-traders from India to Eastern Africa and Far East, and they had a monopoly of the sea-trade and commercial

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<sup>9</sup>. M.A.M. Shukri, “*Muslims of Sri Lanka: A Cultural Perspective*”, **op.cit.**, p. 347

<sup>10</sup>. Afdalul’ Ulama and jayka shu Ayb Alim, **op.cit.**, p. 6

<sup>11</sup>. S.D. Gotein, **op.cit.**, 1967, pp. 351-368

activities. Similarly, southern and north-western Malabar sea-trade must have been the reason for Muslim expansion. There was a sea-port known as Cranganore (formerly Muziris and subsequently Herodolies) which was a well developed and prosperous commercial sea-port from early days. During the later periods many Arabs came from Yemen and Hadramauth regions. They were predecessors to the Muslims of Malayalam coasts known as Mapillas.<sup>12</sup> Thus it is the Mapillas who had established settlement in Sri Lanka prior to the Arabs.

Due to this increase in trade activity in the Malabar area, mainly with Yemen, Hadramauth, and Aden, a thriving Muslim community developed in the east particularly in the Coromandel coast (Ma'bar) of India and steadily found their way in considerable numbers to Sri Lanka where they inter-married the local Muslims. The Muslims of Sri Lanka also during this period were eager for contact with the Muslim world of Ma'bar. This had a very deep impact and influence on the culture of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. As a result of increasing contacts, commercial and cultural, with the Muslims of Ma'bar, a new component which may be called South Indian was added into the composition of the Muslim (Arab) society of Sri Lanka which lost its exclusive Arab character. Thus, they became Indo-Arab in ethnic character rather than purely Arab. The memory of a new wave of immigration that took place due to the outburst of Muslim commercial activity in the Coromandel coast is preserved in the tradition centering around the medieval

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<sup>12</sup>. L.B. Vernon Mendis, **Currents of Asian History**, Calcutta Press, (Calcutta, 1981), p. 416

port of Kayal which came to be the ancestral home of Sri Lankan Muslims.<sup>13</sup> The port of Kayal has been variously referred to as Kahal, Chalia, Chayal, Cael, and Kia-i-le. Commodities such as silk, aromatic roots and pearls were exported from Kayal to Syria, Iraq and Khurasan. Some of these commodities were brought from Sri Lanka. According to Rasid-al-Din and Abdul Razzack,<sup>14</sup> Chinaware was brought by junks to this port where it was exchanged for goods from the Islamic world. Kayal merchants played as active middlemen between West Asia and the Far East. Also when ever long distance trade declined in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, merchants conducted inter-regional trade in the Bay of Bengal. Further, we can note that when direct trade relations with West Asia declined the trade between Sri Lanka and India increased.

Thus, there ensued a cordial and friendly relationship between the Muslims of Sri Lanka and the Muslims of South India during this period. There is a common belief that during this period a large number of Muslims from Kayalpattanam came and settled down in Beruwela, and R.L. Brohier is of the opinion that Kechimale mosque on the sea coast of Beruwela was built by the descendants of those who came from Kayal and settled down in Kechimala harbour in A.D. 1024.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>. M.A.M. Shukri, “*Muslims of Sri Lanka: A Cultural Perspective*”, **op.cit.**, p. 34

<sup>14</sup>. *Narrative of the Voyage of Abd-er-Razzak, Ambassador from Shah Rukh A.H. 845-A.D.1442*, in **India in the Fifteenth Century being a Collection of Narratives of Voyages: The Century Preceding the Portuguese Discovery of the Cape of Good Hope from Latin, Persian, Russian and Italian Sources**, (ed.), R.H. Major, Hakluyt Society, (London, 1859), pp. 1-49

<sup>15</sup>. R.L. Brohier, **Seeing Ceylon**, Government Print, (Colombo, 1981), p. 135

On the whole, Beruwela seems to have risen to prominence as an important Muslim settlement during this period, and we find increasing references to Beruwela in Sri Lankan, and Kayal in South Indian literary works. By this time Beruwela figures as a Muslim trading centre frequented by foreign ships. When the *Girā Sandēśaya*<sup>16</sup> was written in the fifteenth century a flourishing settlement of merchants was found there which is referred to in the literature. *Kōkila Sandēśaya*<sup>17</sup> and *Tisara Sandēśaya*<sup>18</sup> also refer to Muslim women (*Yon liya*) and Muslim settlements in Southern Sri Lanka. In its description of this township, the poet (*Girā Sandēśaya*) refers to the presence of Arab women (*Yon liya*) in the town. Perhaps more important in the present context is its reference to certain residents whom he calls baburan (var. *bamburan*). ‘Have a look at the *baburan*,’ he tells the ‘messenger’ passing the town on his way, ‘and see how they had consumed strong substances like opium and cannabis, are whirling round and round to their hearts’ content, wearing *attana* and *rathmal* flowers on their ears, twirling their moustaches and swinging their batons”.

R.A.L.H. Gunawardana quotes this word *babaran* from *Dambadeni Asna* and *Rajāvaliya* and points out this word denotes the foreigners.

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16. *Girā Sandēśaya*, (ed.), Munidasa Kumarathunga, Sweeya Epa Publisher, (Colombo, 1933), vv. 104-105

17. *Kōkila Sandēśaya*, (ed.), Mudaliyar W.F. Gunawardana, Peramuna Ltd., (Colombo, 1945), v. 59

18. It was a busy settlement of Muslim merchants with many beautiful mansions and large, ‘permanent’ shops, *Tisara Sandēśaya*, (ed.), L.M. Leelasena, Publisher not given, (Tangalla, 1935), v. 74

Further, he says that “the land of the *baburu* is clearly distinguished from the land of Arabs, and occurs between references to the latter and Portugal. It is relevant to note that the land of the Berbers spread westwards from Egypt, along the northern coast of Africa, and that the composition of the Egyptian population included both Arabs and Berbers. The whirling Berbers of Beruwala to whom the poet devoted one whole strophe, probably provided one of the most interesting spectacles in town. They are quite reminiscent of the Mawlawiya sect of Sufism who place great emphasis on devotional ecstasy. Several religious sects in both Asia and Africa traditionally consumed cannabis and opium as a means of inducing a state of ecstasy. The practice has survived to the present day. In the case of the Mawlawiya sect, participation in a whirling dance was considered to be one of the main methods of attaining ecstasy. This sect was formally founded at the end of the thirteenth century, and one of its seven major centres was located at Cairo. The whirling dervishes of the Mawlawiya sect were patronized by the Mamluk sultans. The presence of Arabs, and Berbers and the ritual of whirling dances at Beruwala are strongly suggestive of close connections with the Mamluk kingdom.” Further R.A.L.H. Gunawardana says “If our interpretation is correct, the initiatives of Bhuvanekabahu appear to have brought forth some permanent results in the establishment of a settlement of merchants from the Mamluk kingdom at Beruwala, and the introduction of the influence of the Mawlawiya sect. It is noteworthy that the *Dambadeni Asna*, in which the earliest reference to the land of the Berbers occurs, was written in the reign of the third or the fourth king who bore the name Parakramabahu, that is, between A.D. 1287 and 1293 or between 1302 and 1326 which would be soon after or close to the reign of Bhuvanekabahu.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, “*Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and*

When we go back again to Shukri's interpretation about the similarities of Arabic Tamil and the Swahilli language of East Africa, we can see that it agrees with Gunawardana's interpretation. As it has been shown earlier, the commercial and cultural contact that existed between the Muslims of Sri Lanka and Ma'bar in course of time made them to lose their exclusive Arab character, and the Tamil language too made its impact in their social and cultural life to the extent of becoming their medium of expression in all aspects of their life. But Tamil, as spoken and written by them, assumed a peculiar pattern and shape in respect of script and vocabulary which was generally known as 'Arabic Tamil.' This distinctive language style was in use among the Muslims of Sri Lanka in the medieval times, and this fact is indicated by the 15<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese Captain Odorado Barbosa's description of their language.<sup>20</sup> In a way, Arabic Tamil may be compared to 'Manipravalam' (mix of two languages) style of Malayalam language.<sup>21</sup> In Malayalam, due to Sanskrit influence, a special literary dialect arose containing a large admixture of Sanskrit and this kind of development is called 'Manipravalam' which allegorically refers to a necklace string with pearls and corals<sup>22</sup> or any two gems.

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*Their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka*", **op.cit.**, pp. 82-83

<sup>20</sup>. Emerson Tennent, **op.cit.**, p. 535

<sup>21</sup>. One of the four literary languages of the Dravidian family is spoken on the west coast of Southern India. It developed out of Tamil between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today Malayalam is the language of Kerala—"Malayalam Literature" in **Encyclopaedia Britannica**, Vol. V, Villiam Benton Publisher, (London, 1973), p. 676

<sup>22</sup>. **Ibid.**

But M.A.M. Shukri has pointed out that Arabic Tamil has much more similarities with the Swahili language of East Africa than it has with ‘Manipravalam’. Apart from language, the cultural pattern of both the Muslims of Sri Lanka and the Swahili culture, have many things in common. “Swahili” is a word derived from the Arabic word “Swahil”, a name used from the earliest times by the Arab writers to denote the east coast of Africa. But it is not clear when it was first applied to the people who are usually called ‘Zandi’. But generally speaking, Swahili is a generic name for the inhabitants in the east of Africa and the island of Zanzibar. These inhabitants were the descendants of the Arab traders who had established settlements along the coast in places such as Magdishu, Merka, Lamu, Malindi, and Mombasa and maintained commercial relations with the Persian Gulf, India and beyond. They are descendants of Bantu Negroes and Arab traders, and thus, they are Bantu stock with an Arab infusion, the emergence of a racial pattern similar to South Indian and Sri Lankan Muslims. Their language, Kiswahili or Swahili, is essentially African and Bantu in structure, as Arabic Tamil is essentially Indian and Dravidian in structure. Both are written in Arabic scripts with suitable modifications for phonetical variations.<sup>23</sup>

One may also observe similar cultural patterns between the Swahili culture and the culture of the Tamil-speaking Muslims of South India and Sri Lanka. Influence of Islamic cultural traditions of Hadramauth is common to both the cultures. In respect of Swahili culture, there were streams of immigrants from Hadramauth who introduced their local customs especially the Hadrami tradition of Islamic learning based on Sufi school of thought

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<sup>23</sup>. M.A.M. Shukri, “*Muslims of Sri Lanka: A Cultural Perspective*”, **op.cit.**, p. 344

adhering to the beliefs and doctrines of Ahl-us-Sunna. The Sufis from Yemen and Hadramauth played a significant role in the religious and cultural life of the Muslims of Sri Lanka. Moreover, the trade contact with the Persian Gulf region, especially with Yemen and Hadramauth, as already discussed, also was a contributory factor in the dissemination of Hadrami culture in Sri Lanka.<sup>24</sup>

Ibn Battuta mentions about some of the Sufis who visited Sri Lanka. He speaks of Sheikah Abdallah Iban Khafif, a Persian Sufi, who according to him, was the first to open up the pilgrim path between the jungle of ‘Salawath’(Chilaw) and Kunakar (Kurunegala). He also mentions another Sufi called Sheikh Uthman Ash-Shirazi, whose title Shirazi indicates his Persian origin. But we have no record of any Sufi order (Tariga) existing in Sri Lanka during Battuta’s time.

The lengthy discussion attempted so far has been made to emphasize the important facts regarding languages. That is to examine whether there is any connection between the Arabic Tamil language with Western Asian languages. Yes, certainly there is a connection due to the relation arising out of trade and commerce with West Asia and Sri Lanka. The trilingual inscription found in Galle could explain that very well. In addition to that, the Balangoda cave inscription and Talpitiya mosque inscription written in Arabic-Tamil also clearly indicate this relationship.

However, in Sri Lanka, Sufi activities did not spread or expand due to several reasons. Generally, the Muslims were more interested in trade and

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<sup>24</sup>. **Ibid.**, p. 347

commerce in Sri Lanka than in spreading their religion. Further, Sri Lankan culture and the strongly established social norms would not facilitate any other religion or culture to grow or spread. Political and environmental factors in Sri Lanka prevented that activity. Again there was no capable Muslim population in Sri Lanka to do that work.

Yung-lo (A.D.1368-1644) of the Ming Dynasty who became emperor in the year A.D.1402 was very keen to promote trade and commerce. According to some historians, during that period the Chinese controlled and treated the Indian Ocean as their own lake.<sup>25</sup> But there is no testimony to this information. There is another information that a royal mission with the aim of expansion of the sea-trade was entrusted to an eunuch in the royal court by name (Cheng-Ho) or Ch'eng-tsu<sup>26</sup> who led the navigation right through the Indian Ocean up to Western Africa on seven occasions. He captained all those sea voyages; a recently found evidence indicates that he had been to

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<sup>25</sup>. G.P.V. Somaratna, “*Grand Eunuch Ho and Ceylon*”, **Journal of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, (New Series)**, Vol. XV, 1971, pp. 3-47; T'ien Ju-Kang, “*Cheng Ho's Voyages and the Distribution of Pepper in China*”, **Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain & Ireland**, 1981, pp. 186-196; Haraprasad Ray, “*An Enquiry into the Presence of the Chinese in South and South-East Asia After the Voyages of Zheng He in Early Fifteenth Century*”, in K.S. Mathew, (ed.), **Mariners, Merchants and Oceans: Studies in Maritime History**, Manohar, (New Delhi, 1995), pp. 96-109; Tissa Kariyawasam, “*T'shing Ho nam Cheena Senpatiyāge Samudra Chārica saha Lankāgamanaya*”, **Vidyodaya, Journal of Social Science**, Vol. 7, Nos. 1&2, University of Sri Jayawardhanapura, 1996, 56; Haraprasad Ray, **Trade and Trade Routes between India and China c. 140 B.C.–A.D. 1500**, Progressive Publishers, (Kolkata, 2003), pp. 177-182

<sup>26</sup>. K.M.M. Werake, “*A Re-examination of Chinese Relations with Sri Lanka during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.*”, in C.R. de Silva and Sirima Kiribamune, (eds.), **K. W. Goonewardena Felicitation Volume**, Modern Sri Lankan Studies, Special Issue, Volume II-1987, (Peradeniya, 1989), pp. 89-102

the Middle East on June 21<sup>st</sup> of 1432. But there is no evidence in Chinese chronicles or sources to confirm this.<sup>27</sup>

Again it is said that, in the years A.D. 1406, 1410, 1414 and 1418 he had disembarked on the Sri Lankan shore. In the year 1409 January or February, he had been to the Kingdom of Malacca, and on the return trip in 1410 June or July arrived in Galle in Sri Lanka. It was considered that he installed an epigraph in Persian, Tamil and Chinese languages. From the date given in the text itself, and from other sources, it has been found that the slab was prepared in China on the 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1409 and setup in Galle two years later.<sup>28</sup> There had been many versions and various descriptions by scholars on Tamil and Chinese scripts.<sup>29</sup> Hence, turning on to the Persian

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27. K.N. Chaudhuri, “*A Note on Ibn Taghri Birdi’s Description of Chinese Ships in Aden Jedda*”, **Royal Asiatic Society (Great Britain and Ireland)**, 1989, p. 280

28. Somasiri Devendra, “*The Galle Tri-Lingul Slab Inscription*”, **Sri Lanka and Silk Road of the Sea**, p. 217; “*New Light on Some Arabic Lithic Records in Sri Lanka*”, **Ibid.**, p. 209; M.A.M. Shukri, “*Arabic (Kufic) Inscriptions in Sri Lanka*”, **Ibid.**, p. 198

29. E.W. Perera, “*The Galle Trilingual Stone*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 122-125; S. Paranavitana, “*The Tamil Inscription on the Galle Trilingual Slab*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 331-341; Luciano Perech, “*Some Chinese Texts Concerning Ceylon*”, **The Ceylon Historical Journal**, Vol. III, Nos. 3&4, 1954, pp. 207-210; *The Galle Trilingual Inscription*, Chinese version edited in Joseph Needham, **Science and Civilisation of China**, Vol. 1V, Pt. III, Cambridge University Press, (Cambridge, 1971), p. 532; Somasiri Devendra, “*The Galle Tri-Lingul Slab Inscription*”, **op.cit.**, pp. 209-211; K.M.M. Werake, “*A Re-examination of Chinese Relations with Sri Lanka during the 15<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.*” **op.cit.**, pp. 89-102; Tissa Kariyawasam, **op.cit.**, pp. 56-72; E.B. Perera, **Sripāda Lānjana**,” Prasanna Publisher, (Nugegoda, 1971), pp. 186-189; Rod Erich Ptak, “*China and Calicut in the Early Ming Period Envoys and Tribute Embassies*”, **Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society (Great Britain and Ireland)**, 1989, pp. 95-105; For a technical discussion see Haraprasad Ray, **Trade and Trade Routes between India and China c. 140 B.C.–A.D. 1500**, Progressive Publisher, (Kolkata, 2003), pp. 177-211; Lorna Dewaraja, “*Cheng Ho’s Visits to Sri Lanka and the Galle Trilingual Inscription in the National Museum in Colombo*”, in Daya Amarasekara and Rohitha Dasanayaka, (eds.), **Essays in History and Sociology in Honour of Professor W.M. Sirisena**, Ariya Publisher, Warakapola, 2007, pp. 197-220

script and its descriptions may be considered here for corroborative and authentic information.

In the year 1911, a Provincial Engineer H.F. Tomalin, in the regional office in Galle found this slab in a drain at the junction of Cripps road. (Cheena Kotuwa or China Fort) He handed over the same to the archaeological department. At present it is kept in the Colombo Museum in the Arabic epigraphic collection. There were three epigraphs all referring to the donations offered to three religious places. The trilingual inscription mentions that offerings were made to the temple of Lord Buddha at Adam's Peak. In Tamil what they offered was to *Tenavarai Nayanar* or according to ParNAVITANA to the God of Devinuwara (*Devundra Deviyo*). In the Persian language it is interpreted that offers and donations were made to Holy Mohomed Nabi of Muslim Mosque ("light of Islam"). Kwaja Muhammed has translated the slab inscription into English with the same information.

Although there are a few discrepancies in items donated to three religious centres in the Chinese and Tamil inscriptions, almost similar items have been identified. The inscriptions reveal clearly that they had a proper awareness as to what items are required for religious institutions.

The fact that before the arrival of Europeans, the sea-trade and commerce were carried on peacefully and with mutual understanding among the Chinese, Tamils and the Arabs can be clearly seen from the trilingual epigraph mentioned here. The main languages spoken by the traders must be

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those three as they belonged to all the three and also they had built their own institutions for religious observances. Some believe that a very old Mosque built at Beruwela may be what they refer to. Ching Ho, the representative of the Chinese emperor, also may have known about the mosque which is easily seen from the epigraph. By donating offerings to all the three religions, the Chinese befriended them all to develop their commerce and trade with all of them. By such activities their commerce grew and improved their trade economy.

In this period, apart from the Arabs and Berbers, it is likely that there were a few Gujarati merchants in Sri Lanka, since silk was being imported from their land. Tamil was spoken at Valigama and songs in this language were popular there. One of the two inscriptions of Parakramabahu VI at Devinuvara is in Tamil. In addition to that, the format of the inscription set up by Cheng Ho and Balangoda cave inscription and Talpitiya mosque inscription was written in Arabic-Tamil<sup>30</sup> and they are particularly useful in helping us to understand the situation of that period. It is strange that the Chinese envoy who reveals his adroitness and subtlety in diplomacy by the way he prepared the different versions of his inscription did not deem it necessary to provide a version in Sinhala. The foreign merchants had a great control over the island's commerce during this period. This reduced the Sri Lankan's participation in trade and its profits. But it did not completely destroy the island's economy. In an age which produced shipping magnates like Misqal of Calicut who sent his vessels to Yemen and Persia in the west and to China in the east, the prospects of Sri Lankan traders, both Sinhala

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<sup>30</sup>. M.A.M. Shukri, "*Arabic (Kufic) Inscriptions in Sri Lanka*", **op.cit.**, p. 197

and Tamil, were indeed limited. Parakramabahu VI was perhaps the last Sri Lankan ruler to play a noteworthy role in the sea trade.<sup>31</sup> After the demise of the king Parakramabahu VI, again Sri Lankan Kingdom was involved in political disputes. As a result, Sri Lankan rulers allowed South Indian and Muslim merchants to take over the foreign trade. In this, they showed a preference to Muslim merchants because of their affinity to control the sea-trade and foreign commercial activities of Sri Lanka.

A general issue which concerns Muslim trade with Sri Lanka is its 'Indianisation.' Muslim rule extended throughout northern India and the Deccan by the middle of the fourteenth century, and many Gujarati and Bengali merchants seem to have embraced Islam. This in turn led to the strengthening of the activities of the Muslim trading communities of the Coromandel and Malabar coasts. Consequently, these traders began to develop trade relations with Sri Lanka. As stated earlier, there is a general assumption that West Asian Muslims gradually withdrew from the Indian trade after the thirteenth century, and they became increasingly dependent on Indian Muslims for eastern goods.<sup>32</sup> Here, the most important person was the Zamorin ruler of Calicut whose support was solicited by Sri Lanka through Muslim intermediaries against the Portuguese, a common enemy. The naval forces of the Zamorin were under Muslim command and it was with their help that the Zamorin vanquished his rivals.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>. R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, "*Changing Patterns of Navigation in the Indian Ocean and Their Impact on Pre-colonial Sri Lanka*", **op.cit.**, p. 88

<sup>32</sup>. Sirima Kiribamune, "*Muslims and the Trade of the Arabian Sea.....*", **op.cit.**, p. 188

<sup>33</sup>. K.M. Panikkar, **Malabar and the Portuguese**, Bombay, 1929, Quoted from Lorna Dewaraja, **op.cit.**, p. 191

Through those men, the Zamorin was able to have close contact with Egyptian rulers and sultan of Persia and continued the Muslim trade successfully at Kayalpattanam, one of the flourishing centres for commercial activities. There was a local leader, or an agent for Arabic chieftain, and through him annually 10,000 horses were supplied to the Pandyan king.<sup>34</sup> In this context it is important to understand the term “*Rawthar*”, regarding the horse trade. A segment (sub division) of the Tamil speaking Muslim society is being called Rawthar because of their association with horse trade, horse riding and training. J. B. P. More points out that the word *Ravutu* was retained by the Tamil Muslim military men and their descendants in the Pandya country as a title from this period onwards.<sup>35</sup> But this term comes from very early times and Rawathar generally stands for horsemen.

The flourishing horse trade between Arabia and the east coast of India is referred to in the Sangam literature. During the medieval age, the ports at Kilakkarai, Devipattanam and Kayalpattanam were busy centres of trade in horses. Muslim traders brought the horses in their ships. A painting at Thurupudaimaruder temple and a sculpture at Thirukunrakudi (both in Thirunelveli district) depict ships laden with horses with Muslim sailors.<sup>36</sup> Some mirasdars in Thanjavur district in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries had the

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<sup>34</sup>. J.B.P. More, **Muslim Identity: Print Culture and the Dravidian Factor in Tamil Nadu**, Orient Longman, (New Delhi, 2004), p. 7

<sup>35</sup>. **Ibid.**, p. 13

<sup>36</sup>. J. Raja Mohammad, **op.cit.**, p. 73

title Rawathar and they were expert horse riders.<sup>37</sup> Those who stayed in the Coromandel coast and the hinterland courts of the rulers, chieftains and Zamindars for this purpose, might have contracted matrimonial alliances with native women and their descendants came to be called as Ravuthar or Rawthar. We can note the same word in use by Sri Lankan Muslim community. There are many place names like Rawthawattha, Rawatha Road etc. in Sri Lanka. In Tamil Nadu also there are places like Rawtharnaham (Kallakurichi Taluk), Rawthan Vayl (Pudukkottai Dt.) and Rawthanpalayam (Thirunelveli Taluk). These places might have been their early settlements or their strongholds.

Other terms like Marakkayan and Marakkala Nayan (Arabic-‘Markab’, Tamil-‘Marakkalam’-*marman* ‘wood’+ *kalam* ‘vessel’)<sup>38</sup> are general terms used to denote the Muslims. They are the dominant segment of Muslims in coastal towns of Coromandel, and are known for their numerical strength and wealth. Their settlements were essentially urban in character. Most of the Marakkayars were associated with seafaring and maritime activities. Noboru Karashima, while citing the word Marakkalanayan found in a Tamil inscription of the eleventh century in Sumatra (now in the Jakarta museum), argues that the word seems to relate to the term Marakkayar used to denote the seafaring Muslim merchants of the Tamil Nadu and Kerala

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<sup>37</sup>. **Ibid.**, p. 74 -The well known legend of the Saivite Saint Manikkavasagar of the eighth century A.D. is connected with the purchase of horses for the Pandya king. In the legend Lord Siva appears in disguise as a horseman (Rawther) to protect Manikkavasagar. **Ibid.**

<sup>38</sup>. Asiff Hussein, **Sarandib: An Ethnological Study of the Muslims of Sri Lanka**, A.J. Prints (Pvt.) Ltd., (Dehiwala, 2007), pp. 8-9

coasts in later period.<sup>39</sup> Some other writers also have referred to this inscription and said that the term marakkalanayan is the old form of the term Marakkayar, the ship owning Muslims. But the term nayan or nayakan generally means leader, captain or owner.<sup>40</sup>

The Sinhalese called the Arab traders as “*Marakkala Minissu*” meaning a mariner or a boat man.<sup>41</sup> Marakkala Minissu is a corruption of Markar Minissu. In the Sri Lankan coast the prosperous Malabaris or Sonagars were called Marakkar. This Sonagar term namely ‘Sonagan’ or ‘Sonagar’ actually denotes the Arabs in Tamil literature. Naccinarkiniyar, the commentator of the Tamil classic *Pattupatu*, uses the word ‘Sonagan’ wherever, the word ‘*Yavana*’ occurs.<sup>42</sup> Abdul Rahim actually affirms on the basis of inscription that one of the donors of the great temple at Tanjore was one ‘Sonagar Savur Paranjod’, an Arab Muslim trader.<sup>43</sup> Actually ‘Sonagan’ seems to be the earliest term along with ‘Yavana’ used to refer to Arab Muslim traders. This term was gradually extended to refer also to Tamil Muslim communities later and it continued to exist along with ‘Ravuttar’,

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<sup>39</sup>. Noboru Karashima, “*Indian Commercial Activities in Ancient Medieval Southeast Asia*”, Paper presented in the **Plenary Session of 8<sup>th</sup> World Conference Seminar**, (Thanjavur, 1995)

<sup>40</sup>. J. Raja Mohamad, **op.cit.**, p. 80

<sup>41</sup>. T.B.H. Abeyasingha, “*Muslims in Sri Lanka In Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*”, in M.A.M. Shukri, (ed.), **Muslims of Sri Lanka**, Naleemia, (Beruwela, 1986), pp. 129-130

<sup>42</sup>. J.B.P. More, **Muslim Identity: Print Culture and the Dravidian Factor in Tamil Nadu**, Orient Longman, (New Delhi, 2004), p. 13

<sup>43</sup>. Abdul Rahim, “*Islam in Nagapattam*”, in **Bulletin of the Institute of Traditional Cultures**, 1974, July-December, p. 87

‘Tulukkar’, and ‘Marakar’ to denote Tamil Muslims, even to this day. In the 15-16<sup>th</sup> centuries all the prosperous Sonaga Malabaris were known under the title Markar. Markar came to be spelt as Marakar, Marikar and Maricar at later periods. In the old family documents of the Muslims of Sri Lanka, their ancestors are noted as only Marican.<sup>44</sup> Another term is ‘Moors’ which was originally used by the Portuguese. Due to the geographical propinquity of Portugal with Morocco, the Muslims of Morocco were known as the Moors and the Portuguese might have used the same term to denote the Muslims of Sri Lanka and Tamil Nadu. Not only the descendants of the Arabs in the southern coastal belt were termed as ‘Moors’ (Mouros), even those non-Muslim traders who embraced Islam were also termed as ‘Mouros’ by the Portuguese.

Under these circumstances, the king and the rulers did not oppose when the Muslims converted others to Islam tactfully and peacefully. Their activities were confined to trade and religion only and they progressed rapidly as an independent community. They established their own organizations, and had their own judiciary and social norms. While any dispute in business transactions or problem with a navigator regarding a ship occurred, immediately a panel of judges was formed with Muslim priests, merchants and navigators so that they would solve the dispute without wasting time and money. A similar system of law had been established

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<sup>44</sup>. ‘Maracar’ - the Portuguese records of the sixteenth century mention very often the title of some prominent Muslim ship owners and maritime traders as ‘Maracar.’ The first reference to this term in the Portuguese records is found in year A.D.1504.

among Asian Muslims and has been included in the international judiciary of coastal areas of Asia.<sup>45</sup>

The Muslim traders always considered and worked with the theme “time is money”. They did not want to get involved in the time consuming judiciary system prevailing at the time. That was the main reason for obtaining the trade privilege from the rulers. The Sri Lankan rulers also listened to Muslim people as they gained much wealth from foreign trade by Muslim merchants, especially during the period of economic instability in Sri Lanka. There was a change of economy from paddy cultivation to export-oriented trade witnessed by the rulers. However, the Muslims carried on peacefully their sea-trade and expanded their population in Sri Lanka.

Due to increase of the India-Muslim merchants along the coastal regions of India, there was a rapid increase in Muslim settlements in Sri Lanka too. With the beginning of the 15<sup>th</sup> century Tamil power in the North of Sri Lanka was reduced drastically, and as there were no other opponents, Muslim colonies and settlements increased rapidly. The original settlements in Beruwala and Galle were important centres, and new colonies were established along the coastal towns of Sri Lanka. Portuguese historian Farnao de Queyroz records in a tone of complaint that Muslims arrived at the rate of five to six hundred a year and that they penetrated to the interior as well.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>. Alexander Johnstone, *op.cit.*, 543

<sup>46</sup>. They entered Ceylon by trade and by money, and they multiplied there to such an extent, both by generation and by the continuation of commerce, for there came 500 to 600 each year, that not only in the maritime ports, but even inland there were already villages of them in all the Dissavas. *Father Farnao de Queyroz, The*

Those who settled and lived in Indian sea-ports and Sri Lankan coastal areas were strong in sea-trade and commerce during this period, and they trained and handed over the sea-trade to new generations. Dutch and British books and records in the past have recorded that the two groups of Muslims who lived in the coastal areas of Southern India and Sri Lanka were identified as Ceylon Moors. Arab settlers married Sinhalese and Tamil women and they settled down, and the progeny of the new generation belonged to both the groups. Ancient Arabs who settled in those settlements had close cultural and religious ties with West Asia through trade and commercial activities. But this did not continue for long. Similarly, Indo-Lankan Arab settlers went to meet their own clan settled just above the Bay of Mannar for their cultural and religious oneness.

However, a blend of all these cultures had been found in the life and activities of the Arab traders settled in the Sri Lankan territories. By passage of time, the West Asian character of these traders disappeared and Sinhalese and Tamil aspects of culture dominated their life-styles with traces of East African Swahili culture. These were so because they had a marital and continuous commercial contacts with the Sinhalese and Tamil Muslim traders for several centuries. This trend continued in subsequent years also and thus it could be stated that trade made a tremendous impact on the lives of the people of Sri Lanka and West Asia.

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*Temporal and Spiritual Conquest of Ceylon*, (trans.), S.G Perera, Book 3&4, A.C Richards, (Colombo, 1930), p. 742