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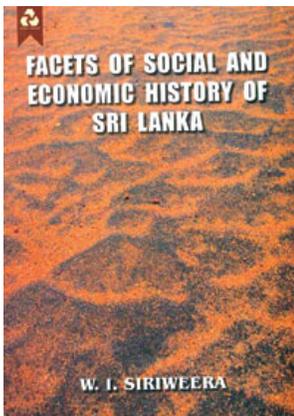
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## Facets of Social and Economic History of Sri Lanka

Author : W. I. Siriweera (Published by Dayawansa Jayakody and Company, 2014, pp. 222)

January 24, 2015, 4:41 pm



Book Review

Reviewed by Saman Kelegama

The book is based on a collection of essays and articles written by the author over the last several decades but for the purpose of greater coherence it has been enlarged, revised and updated to suit the thematic integrity of the title of the book. In order to maintain greater coherence a new essay on 'Collective Identities and Social Stratification' has been inserted. Most of the material presented in the book seeks to cover areas such as land and land use, climate, floods, droughts, agriculture, sanitation, diseases and health care, land tenure and revenue administration. Needless to say, all these areas are of utmost relevance for understanding the social and economic history of Sri Lanka.

The book is divided into nine Chapters commencing with the political, social, cultural and strategic importance of Sri Lanka in the context of South Asia in the opening chapter and running through settlement patterns, collective identities and social stratifications in Chapters 2 and 3. Issues such as climate, including floods and droughts, agriculture and animal husbandry are dealt with in Chapters 4 and 5. Social welfare issues such as sanitation and health are dealt with in Chapter 6 while land tenure including the "Rajakariya" system particularly in temple lands are discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. Chapter 9 concludes with a discussion on the important topic of revenue administration.

### Regional Context

The introductory Chapter dealing with Sri Lanka's position in the South Asia region is mainly concentrated on Sri Lanka's relationship with its giant neighbour India. It stresses that India's peculiar quality was absorption and synthesis and for long periods of time, rival religions and cultures have co-existed in South Asia.

The historical evolution of societies in South Asia was a complex process. Sri Lankan society evolved with waves of migrations from India, both from the North and South; and later, from around the eighth century AD, by the Muslims. As in politics, in the sphere of religion and culture too, South Asia presents a picture of great diversity, but here again absorption and synthesis is evident in the cycle of history.

In dealing with religion, the author notes that in Sri Lanka, Buddhism which was the dominant religion assimilated many features of Hinduism such as Gods of the Hindu pantheon and even the caste system. Even the demon rituals of the original tribal group were accommodated both in Buddhism and Hinduism in Sri Lanka.

In South Asia, while empires and kingdoms appeared and disappeared, the popular religion, social structure and village life were sustained through assimilation and absorption. In these respects and in other aspects of culture, South Asia, with all its diversities can be regarded as a unit distinct from the rest of the world.

In terms of defence and security, the author emphasizes that of all the modern states of South Asia as they exist today, Sri Lanka was the first country to have emerged in historical times as a distinct geopolitical entity with a continuous national history lasting until modern times. On the other hand, centres of power in South India posed intermittent threats to the Sri Lankan state from very early times. What is important to note is that the Sri Lankan state particularly when it was militarily weak and divided, could not successfully meet the threat of even distant foreign powers such as the Portuguese, Dutch or British.

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## Early Settlements

Chapter 2 deals with the settlement pattern in Sri Lanka from early times. According to archaeological evidence there had been scattered settlements of pre-historic man in such areas as Bandarawela and Balangoda. But large scale settlements began only after the arrival of migrants from Northern India who began to colonize the island from around the sixth and fifth centuries B. C. For more than seventeen centuries, the centres of political, economic, and cultural activity were located in the Dry Zone regions. The availability of water supply, fertile soil, and forests easily cleared, induced the early settlers to develop these regions. Gradually however, the settlements dispersed to the Wet Zone and the lowlands and later the highlands while the Jaffna Peninsula was populated, beginning from the 1st century AD, increasingly by the Tamil population.

## Social Stratification

Chapter 3 is an important section as it is a new essay which the author has inserted with the objective of maintaining coherence among the otherwise disparate issues dealt with in the book. It deals with collective identity and social stratification such as tribes and clans, ethnicity and the caste system and the different social groups in ancient Sri Lankan society. The author however stresses that these collective identities did not contribute to social disintegration and compartmentalization.

Broadly, ancient Sri Lankan society can be categorized into four groups. The first was the King, the nobility, rich merchants and their families. The second category was the middle grade state officials, commercial entrepreneurs, teachers, physicians, and such other professional groups. The third group the largest consisted of ordinary peasants and craftsmen. The city cleaners, cemetery workers and those engaged in traditionally condemned professions such as hunting are included in the last group.

This social system was sustained however not through suppression or by force of arms but by utilizing an ideology developed in "popular Buddhism" and partly supported by doctrine.

## Climate Change

The connected subjects of climate and agriculture are dealt with in Chapters 4 and 5 of the book. The information on climate, floods and droughts in pre-colonial Sri Lanka is meager but there is no doubt that climate change was a crucial factor in the collapse of the ancient Rajarata civilization. The author notes that sea erosions and eruptions from time to time led to reducing the land extent of the country.

During the time of the ancient civilization, the unbroken mantle of forest in the mountain region induced an abundant and regular rainfall in the island. Subsequently, large scale clearance of forest led to reduction in water supplies, particularly after the 10th and 13th centuries when primeval forest in the mountain region was cleared by settlers. Apart from the reduction in water supplies, the large scale clearance of forests had resulted in other ecological changes such as flooding, drought, breaching of the dams of reservoirs as well as earth slips. A number of famines have been referred to in ancient chronicles even from the time of King Dutugemunu and during the times of other Kings —Valagamba, Kunconage, Sri Sangabo, Kithsirimega, Parakramabahu 11 and Bhuwaneka Bahu 1. The author emphasizes that the most important lesson of ancient historical records is that there is no such thing as a "climate normal". Climate has always changed resulting in natural calamities on a variety of different time scales.

## Agriculture

Connected with the analysis of climate change is the author's description of the related topics of agriculture and animal husbandry of early times. While agriculture was not a part of the life of the pre-historic people of Sri Lanka in the late Stone Age or Mesolithic period, the Dry Zone settlers particularly from the first century BC developed an irrigation system which provided the foundation for the civilization from the 4th century BC to about the 13th century AD.

The agricultural system consisted of many forms from the earliest "chena" or slash-and-burn cultivation to more improved methods of cultivation. Crops included not only paddy but other such as "kurakkan," various cereals, sugarcane, cotton, vegetables and home garden produce and the author gives a detailed description of the cultivation process. Animal husbandry consisted largely of buffalo and cattle rearing, goat breeding and pig keeping. The author also describes the social system of cultivation and sharing of the produce especially the "ande" system or crop sharing between the landowners and the peasants with disadvantages to the latter. The author concludes by stating that while in contemporary Sri Lanka agricultural operations have been mechanized, with the introduction of new varieties of seeds, fertilizers, weedicides, herbicides etc., basically the key farming system on the whole has remained the same throughout the centuries.

## Health

Chapter 6 contains a topic which the author had written as a separate article (in a number of articles which have been collected and made into this book). It deals with sanitation and the health care

system that existed in Sri Lanka during the height of the Rajarata civilization up to the 13th century AD.

Ancient Sri Lankan society too was stratified with the royalty, nobility, and priesthood leading to relatively comfortable lives compared to the peasants who faced hardships. Nevertheless, rules on hygiene were applicable to all. Regulations were also adopted in health and sanitation management in cities and the remains of ancient Sri Lankan cities demonstrate the attention paid to the environment, sanitary conditions and health care, including garbage and refuse disposal, toilets and lavatories.

There appear to have been four types of hospitals: (a) monastic hospitals, (b) hospitals for laymen, (c) maternity homes, and (d) outdoor treatment hospitals. The author describes some of these hospitals in detail particularly the monastic hospitals, which were managed by the monasteries themselves while the state accepted responsibility for maintaining the majority of other hospitals. The ancient texts also refer to many kinds of illnesses prevalent which were treated by "Ayurveda" system as well as "Siddha" medicine and the "Yunani" system. Health care was not only for humans but to veterinary care as well.

#### Land Tenure

The connected issues of land tenure and the "rajakariya" system are dealt with in Chapters 7 and 8 with the latter chapter dealing in greater detail the "rajakariya" system in temple lands. Generally, most writers have held that in Sri Lanka as in India, the King as "bhupathi" was the owner of all land and that lands were granted by the King or on his orders to individuals or institutions for various services rendered. The author examines this theory and concept and disagrees with it in certain respects and states that there is no sound basis for the theory of the King's sole ownership of land in Sri Lanka.

Royal grants of land fall into three categories. First, lands granted by the King to institutions and individuals with most complete proprietary rights. Second, the transfer of only the taxes due to him from the land, and thirdly, the commutation of the income arising from a land to the grantees. Three other types of tenures known "ande," "ukas" and "palta" are also occasionally found. Details of such grants were generally written on 'ola' leaves or copper plates called "sannas," and delivered in the King's presence or sometimes in his absence. The author concludes that the problems of land tenure in medieval Sri Lanka are not so simple as earlier writers have imagined and his studies reveal a more multi-centred and complex pattern.

#### Tax/Revenue

The author concludes his collection of essays on the social and economic facets of ancient Sri Lanka by describing the foundation on which the political, economic and social structure functions, i.e. the nature and collection of state revenue and the revenue administration in ancient times.

The fundamental theory was that taxes levied were the King's dues for the protection he offered to his subjects. However in order to reconcile the needs of the rulers with the interests of the ruled, the theory laid down one-sixth as the King's share though in times of emergencies, this had sometimes risen to one fourth of the produce. In practice however, the amount of the produce collected in the form of taxes was not uniform in all periods and in all localities of the country, sometimes being more and sometimes less depending on the effectiveness of the rulers and the local tax gatherers.

The main sources of revenue were the land tax exacted from different categories of cultivations, the most important being the tax levied on paddy fields. Chena lands were also subject to tax but King Nissankamalla is reported to have abolished this. Apart from land tax the other important taxes was on trade or customs dues which formed the bulk of the King's revenues. Other taxes included tolls (other than on transported merchandise for sale) and taxes on water from irrigation works.

Apart from direct taxes, other sources of royal revenue included fines, treasure troves, and death duty. The King also derived income from his own lands and monopolies over certain trade commodities such as gems, pearls, cinnamon, and elephants as well as pearl fisheries.

Revenue administration was done by various officials such as keepers of accounts in the Treasury as well as officials who undertook the entire Treasury administration known as "bhandarapothhakin". The Chief Treasurer is denoted by different terms in various sources such as "Mudal Nayakaya" and "Bandagara Nayaka". Village authorities were entrusted with the collection of village taxes due to the King from each village. The collection of taxes at the sea ports was in charge of an officer at the port. A multi-centred socio-economic structure is therefore revealed in the revenue administration too. There was also commutation of taxes by the King on certain lands such as temple lands and charitable institutions and on certain officers of the King.

#### Overview

The literature on Sri Lankan Economic History is meagre and scattered — Siriweera's earlier work (published in 1994, Vikas Publications) titled "A Study of the Economic History of Pre-Modern Sri Lanka", Martha Prickett's work on "Sri Lanka's Foreign Trade Before AD 600: Archaeological Evidence" (in K.M De Silva, et al., ed. (1990) "Asian Panorama: Essays in Asian History, Past & Present), some essays in the special issue of the Economic Review (People's Bank) titled "Ancient Economy & Society: A Retrospect of Heritage (Oct/Nov 1997), etc., come into mind. This book under review is a useful addition to the existing collection as it covers areas of importance of medieval times that have been bypassed by other researchers and specialist historians.

Overall, the book gives an analytical view on various social, economic and welfare aspects of ancient and medieval society in Sri Lanka. The weakness of the volume is that the different topics, though important in themselves, lacks the coherence necessary to provide the reader with a comprehensive socio-economic view of medieval Sri Lanka society. The author's attempt to rectify this in the form of a new essay on "Collective Identities and Social Stratification" is only partially successful. Moreover, several questions for an economic historian still remain unanswered: (1) why was Sri Lanka's geographical locational advantage which the colonial and other foreign powers exploited remain underutilized during the pre-colonial ancient times? Was it due to lack of familiarity of the global market, lack of maritime capability or lack of entrepreneurship or a combination of these factors?; (2) did the colonial interlude retard the continuous evolution of the pre-modern Sri Lankan economy and make it a dependent economy and did it dilute the irrigation and engineering skills of the people that are so well demonstrated in the archeological sites? Despite these shortcomings the book would be of assistance and interest to economic historians, social analysts, students and researchers of Sri Lankan economic history as well as to the general public alike.

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