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Book Review:

Rohitha Dasanayaka, *Arabs in Serandib: Trade Relations between Sri Lanka and West Asia from Ancient to 15th Century A.D. A Historical and Archaeological Survey*.
Colombo: S. Godage & Brothers, 2020. Pp. 364.

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Arabs in Serandib is the first full-scale study on the trade relations between Sri Lanka and West Asia written by Rohitha Dasanayaka. The book consists of seven chapters with an extensive introduction on the sources utilized by the author; which includes 40 pages, a bibliography, and three appendixes: a collection of West Asian inscriptions, Coins and Ceramics scattered all over the Island.

This book was initially completed as a doctoral dissertation, using a lot of new evidence. There is no mystique about the title. In fact, it is a clear statement of what the book is about. This is one of the unique characteristics found in the writings of Dasanayaka. It is absolutely direct and meticulous: *Ambalama*, *Adasnada saba Taradiya*, and there is no jargon which some consider fashionable. Among the large number of scholars who conducted studies on the Muslims in Sri Lanka, the prominent historians, such as M.A.M. Shukri, Sirima Kitibamune, and Lorna Dewaraja are the pioneers of the present research area. At the same time, it should be noted here that most of these studies on the Muslims of Sri Lanka, were based on one perspective rather than comparative research studies. Therefore, the book *Arabs in Serandib*, will be greatly welcomed by the scholars who are interested in trade inter-connections between Sri Lanka and West Asia.

In the introduction, the author has focused on analyzing the primary sources, both Sri Lankan and West Asian, which he has referred to, for the study. The significance of this section is that the author seems to have analyzed large

quantities of data, using documents and a lot of new archaeological evidence such as pottery, ceramics, coins, and Arabic tombstones concerning the relationship Sri Lanka maintained with the West Asian world.

The most important fragment of this section includes the identification of names of Sri Lanka by both Western and West Asians, on a variety of sources. He has referred to over 20 Arab and Persian texts in his study. Usually, most of the West Asian writers have named Sri Lanka as *Serandib* which seems to be derived from the Persian term “Serendivi”. In the early period, geographical experts such as Buzurg-Ibn Shahriyar used the name Sahilan along with *Serandib*. Another name mentioned by Ibn Battuta was Saylan, and this was derived from the páli form, Sinhala-dwipa, *i.e.* Sinhala. The English name Ceylon was derived from the Arabic name, Saylan. However, sundry variations of Serandib occur in the writings of Arab geographers. The kitab of Al-Biruni makes a mention Singal-dib or Serandib. The writer of *Hudud al-‘alam* (late 10th century A.D., written in Persian) has named it as Taberna. Earlier, Khwarizmi called it Siyalan, and Ibn Rustah has also mentioned the Greek name, Tabrobani, along with Sarandib. Yaqut called it both by the terms Serandib and Saylan, while Rashid-up-Din and Abu’ I-Fida identified it as Samka-dib and Sanka-dib.

According to the author, the content of his book has been arranged according to a chronological sequence. Beginning with the early phase of maritime trade of the Indian Ocean, the author has clearly emphasized the role of Sri Lanka and its status in the East-West commercial networks, emphasizing its strategic location, the availability of raw material and the possession of a number of significant harbors. In spite of that, in the first chapter of the monograph, the author has given weight to examine the contribution of West Asia as the chief intermediary in the maritime trade between the East and the West from prehistoric times until the sixth century A.D.

With the birth of Islam in the seventh century, the Arabs emerged both as a political and a religious power. Within a short period of time, the Arab empire embraced the whole of West Asia and stretched across Northern Africa to reach the Atlantic region. To the East, Iran was conquered in the early years of Arab expansion and at the beginning of the 8th century A.D., they had established their power in Sind and Multan in India. Arab, Persian and East African Muslims carried on their businesses up to China in the East through trading settlements established at the port towns in India, Sri Lanka and the South East Asian region. The seven chapters of the book, *Arabs in Serandib*, go to great lengths to emphasize the commercial networks which progressively linked the West Asian lands with India, Sri Lanka, and other countries beyond the sub-continent as far as Southeast and far Eastern regions. Although the focus is on the trade contacts between these two regions, Arabia and Sri Lanka, the author expands on an

extensive view of geographical knowledge collected from Sri Lankan, Arabic and Persian sources that the trading network bonds with.

The significance of the positioning of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean for commercial networks has long been emphasized by many historians and archaeologists. However, very few detailed studies have been conducted on the West Asian trade relations. An outstanding contribution made by the prominent scholar of the subject Sirima Kiribamune is an article in 1986 on the study of Muslim trade in the Arabian Sea between the birth of Islam and 15th century A.D. giving special reference to Sri Lanka. Then onwards, no one seems to have attempted to make a deep impact on the present subject. In this respect, the significance of the position of Sri Lanka in the commercial networks of the West Asian world has been analyzed in this monograph filling the vacuum of uncovered research in the Sri Lankan history using fresh evidence.

While discussing the involvement of West Asia and the rhythm of the trade network in the Indian Ocean, the author has described the social and political factors as well as the aspects of inter-state relations which provided the framework on how the trade networks functioned. On the basis of significant views of scholars such as R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, Sirima Kiribamune, and W.I. Siriweera, Dasanayaka clarifies how the changing patterns of trade in the Indian Ocean affected the political trends in Sri Lanka during the period from the seventh century to the end of the 15th century A.D.

The most important discussion on the subject was led by the eminent scholar R.A.L.H. Gunawardana, tracing the correlation between the political changes of Sri Lanka and the rhythm of trade in the Indian Ocean. In his article, "Total Power or Shared Power: A Study of the Hydraulic State and its Transformation in Sri Lanka from the Third Century A.D.", he stated that the periods of prolific activity in the construction of irrigation works in Sri Lanka coincided with the most flourishing periods of trade. This explanation implies that the commercial gain has provided resources for hydraulic engineering. He points out that there was only one major irrigation project undertaken between the 7th and the 9th centuries A.D., in sharp contrast with the intense irrigation activities in the preceding period. It has been suggested that the most prolific activity in the building of irrigation tanks and canals coincided with the most flourishing period of trade. Using copious evidence, Dasanayaka has convincingly argued that there was no retreat in the local participation or the earning of profits from trade during this period as far as Sri Lanka was concerned.

However, it is accepted that the changing patterns of trade networks in the Indian Ocean with the growth of Arab sea-faring from the 7th century onwards, has greatly impacted on the political phenomena of the Island. The author of this

book has primarily analyzed the effect of Arab seafaring on the shifting processes of the principal areas of East-West exchange trade as well as its effect on the political phenomenon of the region.

The early growth of the Arab empire was a great achievement of the Northern Arabs who had no experience on oceanic trade. However, later on, the Arab traders entered the Indian waters using the Red Sea route and the region surrounded by the Persian Gulf with the help of two commercial powers, Ethiopians and Persians during the period from the 4th century A.D. to the 6th century A.D. They maintained a monopoly in the Arab Sea huddling with Indian and Sri Lankan foreign trade activities. Due to the growth of Muslims from the 7th century onwards, the trade network shifted from the principal exchanging area; from the Arabian Sea to the Bay of Bengal. This resulted in shifting the main port city of the Island from Manthai to Ghokanna, situated directly on the Bay of Bengal. It affected the Sri Lankan political sphere because the interest in trade was the major source of state income at that time. As a result of long droughts, the main political center of the Island drifted from Anuradhapura to Polonnaruwa in the 10th century A.D. It should be mentioned here, the fact that between the 7th and the 10th centuries A.D., four Sri Lankan rulers (Aggabodhi IV (667-683), Aggabodhi VII (727-777), Udaya I (797-802) and Sena I (833-853)), left Anuradhapura and ruled from the North-Eastern city of Polonnaruwa signifying this transformation which proceeded during the period.

From the 10th century to the end of the 13th century, the region surrounding the Bay of Bengal turned out to be a more profitable trading area than ever before with Arab merchants. The Persian ships were avoided by going to Canton in China. This resulted in the creation of a power struggle for political supremacy in the region of the Bay of Bengal.

Then, the next landmark of Sri Lankan political history was marked by the period from the 13th century to the 15th century, with the shifting of the capital from Polonnaruwa to the South West region of the Island. The changes that were taking place in the trading patterns of the Indian Ocean during the latter half of the 12th century has been identified as the main factor in this political scenario.

The traditional commercial policies of China have significantly changed during the period of the Southern Sung dynasty (1127-1278), with the decision taken to discard the tributary trading system. The Chinese entered the maritime trade system using their vessels causing great repercussions on the trade patterns of the entire region around the Indian Ocean and consequently, the principal exchanging area of the East-West trade network shifted from the Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea. All intermediaries in the East-West trade, Southeast Asians and the countries around the Bay of Bengal lost their major source of state

income. In this context, the ports of Gujerat, Malabar and Southwest Sri Lanka emerged as the most crucial areas of the maritime trade in the Indian Ocean while establishing Muslim trade settlements maintaining their closest ties with Sri Lanka and India after the middle of the 13th century. Thus, the significance of the book is that though its main concern is restricted to trade and commercial interactions between West Asia and Sri Lanka, the political phenomenon which prevailed at that time has also been revealed. The author of the monograph has attempted to clarify the close ties between the rhythm in the patterns of trade and the political movements of the region, reflecting his analytical skills.

Trade has often been the prelude to cultural dissemination. In the sixth chapter of the monograph, Dasanayaka attempts to draw the attention of the reader towards the cultural relations between Sri Lanka and Arabs with the birth of Islam in the 7th century. The author has utilized the report, *Ajayab-ul-Hind* or 'Marvels of India', written by Buzurb Ibn Shahriyar, in 960 A.D. to confirm the details related to the cultural contacts of Sri Lanka with Madinah during the lifetime of the Prophet. According to that, the people of Sri Lanka had heard about the Prophet and his teachings which prompted the ruler (Aggabodhi III) to send an envoy to Arabia on what could be termed a 'fact-finding mission.' It is stated that when the envoy did reach Madinah, the Prophet was dead and so was Abu Bakar, the first Caliph. He met the Caliph Umar (654-664 A.D.) However, on the return journey, the envoy himself died on the coast of Makran. His servant returned to provide a report to the Sri Lankan ruler. Then onwards, the cultural interactions between these two regions developed significantly. The Islamic people believed that the Adam's Peak situated in Sri Lanka contained the footprint of Prophet and it made a great impression on their cultural relationship with the Island.

We find that the Arabs settlements were set up across the trade routes up to the far Eastern region. In Sri Lanka, they established port cities in the Western and the Southern sea border of the Island without any political intervention. There is no evidence of religious or cultural antagonism in Sri Lanka during the period under research. All documented evidence on religious beliefs and practices referring to their culture, has been utilized by the author to show how they earned amicable and friendly treatment from the majority of non-Muslim people not only in Sri Lanka but throughout the Eastern world.

On the whole, the present monograph can be concluded as a collection of valuable documents and an outstanding contribution to knowledge. There is no doubt that this will be a standard work of reference. To all those who are interested in this area of study, the book will no doubt be an extremely useful reference work. His investigations on the interactions between West Asia and Sri Lanka open up new lines of inquiry. In 2019, this book was awarded the State literary award for the best research and academic work.