

Kra Canal in Thailand and the Sea Trade in Indian Ocean

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Abstract

Indian Ocean region and the vast landscape situated encircling the Ocean is considered to be one of the world's prominent hubs for sea trade since the bygone era. The notable reason for the significance of the Indian Ocean is the abundance of the trade route that connects the western and the eastern hemisphere, easing the trade activities that encompass the entire world. Amidst these sea trade activities that took place between the nations, India and Sri Lanka were main actors in the transactions. China too, expanding its territorial integrity, attempted to use the Kra canal in Thailand to extend its sea trade in the Indian Ocean region instead of using the Sea Strait of Malacca that was prominently used for sea trade at that time. This research paper is compiled as a comprehensive study carried out through archaeological reference materials and historical studies about the nature of the sea trade activities that have been carried out in the Indian Ocean region through Kra canal.

Introduction

In the exchange of commodities from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean since the ancient times, the Kra Canal which was situated in the southern part of Thailand across the Kra Isthmus was used instead of the Sea Strait of Malacca. In terms of its geostrategic location, Kra Canal is situated at the narrowest point towards the North of the Malay Peninsula that separates Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand. As the studies have found, starting its premier trade activities during the 4th and 5th Century B.C., there have been sea routes established by combining 12 major routes including Takuapa, Tavoy, Ranong and Singgora.

Discussions and new initiatives have been planned in the consequent years starting from the 16th Century in order to outstretch the canal and implement a strategized system of transportation of goods and commodities. It has also suggested in developing the trade activities in the Indian Ocean which played a key role as the focal point of the exchanges between the West and the East. Therefore, the attention has to be given in exploring about the importance provided by the Kra Canal in expanding sea trade in the Indian Ocean since ancient times. This research paper entails an analysis through reference materials of archaeological and historical importance, regarding the nature of the sea trade activities launched in the Indian Ocean through the Kra Canal.

Methodology

In this research paper that mainly focuses on the contribution of Kra Canal in the sea trade activities of the Indian Ocean, both quantitative and qualitative data are considered for the analysis. For the collection of the appropriate data required for the study following methods such as primary and secondary source references and the interviews carried out, using the participant observation method in ethnographic research were used. As primary sources and secondary sources, the comprehensive studies based on the nature of the sea trade activities that took place between the Indian ocean region and the Pacific ocean region from the pre-historic era to the modern initiatives are considered. The studies used for the research are based on the existing archaeological records (investigations, excavations and historical artifacts) and written proofs of legends, travelogues, research papers and other technical papers.

The data collected in the form of quantitative and qualitative research are based on the archaeological and the historical data provided by the Department of Archaeology in Sri Lanka, National Museum Department and the Department of National Archives while data are also gathered through the records provided by the Sri Lanka Coast Guard, Central Bank of Sri Lanka and Sri Lanka Tourism Promotion Bureau.

Furthermore, with relation to the topic addressed through this research paper in collecting the primary data needed to the study, interviews that were carried out and questionnaires that were distributed among the local and foreign researchers were taken into consideration in order to obtain further data and to get an in-depth understanding about their personal experiences about the research area. The quantitative and qualitative data that were obtained by using the aforementioned methods were used in accomplishing the main objective of this study.

Literature Review

As a means of exploration on the sea trade activities that took place in the Indian Ocean with the adjoined Kra Canal, primary and secondary sources were used. On the way towards finding out the necessary information for the research carried out from the pre-historic era to the modern times about the sea trade activities in the Indian ocean, the technical research studies such as “Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean : An Economic History from the Islam to 1750” (Chaughri,1985), “The Maritime Silk Road : History of an Idea” (Guan, 2016), “The Indian Ocean in World History” (Kearney, 2004) and “Literary References : Ports of Historical and Spiritual Contacts” (Silva, 2013) were used. These research studies mainly analyzed the manner in which the man has taken steps in crossing the Indian Ocean region during the pre-historic era and beginning of prolonged sea journeys for the purpose of collecting raw materials due to the emergence of civilizations on its way towards the development of the marine infrastructure facilities. Apart from that, the

establishment of the sea ports along the coastal belts of India and Sri Lanka that were main economic hubs during the time and the emergence of cities with economic importance in the motif of providing services for them are also few other factors that this research addresses.

From the prior centuries along the way towards Sri Lanka's progressive success in trade activities, the country has been recognized as a major destination for the exchange of goods and commodities. With this, it becomes an undeniable factor to focus on the relationship maintained with China and Sri Lanka in extending trade activities in the Indian Ocean. To prove the long term relationship maintained between the two countries, there have been a considerable amount of documents and journals written by utilizing the historical and archaeological factors. Among the prominent articles that were focusing on the mutual inter-relationship between India and Sri Lanka, from the 1st Century B.C. upto the reign of Sri Jayawardanapura Kotte, the journal articles "A History of Sri Lanka (2008)" and "History of Sri Lanka (1959)" written by K.M de Silva take a special consideration due to its validity for the modern day. From the past, China-Sri Lanka relations which were known as the Sino- Sri Lanka during the-then era have been progressing over the years in terms of trade and economic relations. A journal that was written in Sinhalese after an inclusive reference to historical artifacts is "The Economic History of Ancient Sri Lanka (2014)" by S. Ranawella. Other studies such as "Maritime Cultural Interaction between Sri Lanka and China Based on Archaeological Artifacts of both Countries (2013)" written by G. Ranasinghe, "A Study of Chinese Coins in Sri Lanka (2012) by G. Ranasinghe and A. Chandima" and "An Overview of China Ceramic Discovered in Sri Lanka (2003) written by P.L.Premathilaka also discuss about the strengthened inter-relationship made between Sri Lanka and China.

Among the reference articles that were written focusing on the geostrategic location of Sri Lanka in the Indian Ocean for providing mooring and stationing facilities for merchant vessels in the country, the studies "Literary References: Ports of Historical and Spiritual Contacts" (2013) carried out by N.D Silva, "Sri Lanka and South-East Asia (2016)" by W. M Sirisena and "Maritime Commerce and Ports in Ancient Sri Lanka (2013)" by W. ISiriweera are considered to be of major importance.

"Thailand's Isthmus and Elusive Canal Plans since 1850s (2016)" by S. Dobbos, "Strategic Implication of the Possible Construction of the Thai Canal (2007)" by I. Kinder and "Kra Canal (1824-1910): The Elusive Dream (2012)" by C.N.Y Kit focus on the historical background of Kra Canal of Thailand. In most of the times in the modern day discussions, it was proposed to expand the Kra Canal to broaden the economic advantage that has been taken from the route. Yet it was found that Kra Canal was used instead of the Malacca Sea Strait as a mode of entrance to the Indian Ocean region during the 4th and the 5th Century B.C. as to the archaeological and historical autopsies analyzed by the prior researchers.

Discussion

The Importance of the Indian Ocean as a Center for Inter-Exchanges between the East and the West

The Indian Ocean is surrounded by Asia, Africa, Australia and Antarctica at a mass stretch doubling the advantage of the sea. In the landscapes of these regions, there are visible remarks of the development of sea trade activities that took place along the sea route and the abundance of sea ports which were developing ever since. Before man began the agricultural cultivations, there

was proof that they have engaged in sea trade activities in land areas, coastal regions and estuaries (Fuller, 2011). It has been clear that the commencement of transportation through the sea routes have been centralized upon the people living in the West and the East. As evidenced, it has been found out that civilization started from the 1st Century B.C. with the man's sea explorations from the Northern Asian regions to Australia. Wood has been used to create the merchant ships to trespass the oceans and to exchange goods such as yams, coconut, plantains, sugar cane and other endemic plants. (Pearson, 2003; Kearney, 2004; Bushman, 2007; Silva, 2013; Ranawella, 2014)

In the Western parts of the Indian Ocean region, there are written evidences to prove the starting of the sea trade activities by the people belonging to the Egyptian, Mesopotamian and the Indus river valley civilizations. From the artifacts and the documents found by Mesopotamia during the 4th and 3rd Century B.C. it was seen that people have started sea trade activities in the Gulf of Arab region. With the upward social mobility that was evident at that time with the development of civilizations, the need for goods and services became a required necessity. Among those goods were the luxurious commodities. The raw materials included types of stones, wood, metals required to build military equipment used for war and various decorative clay vessels were able to draw the attention of the vendors and the imperial community during the contemporary time (Pearson, 2003 ; Kearney, 2004 ; Bushman ; 2007).

By the 1st Century B.C. the written proofs and legends have proved about the sea trade activities that have taken place in the Indian Ocean region. The facts regarding the development of the prolonged sea travels were reported to have been taken place during the 1000th Century B.C. and the 300 A.D. whereas the function of the monsoonal winds in the Indian Ocean were found during the 3rd Century B.C. although authenticated statistical data of the monsoonal wind transmission found during the 1000 B.C. With these findings the contemporary sailors have been able to trespass the Arab Sea with the knowledge of the monsoonal winds and astrology. Similarly in the 2nd and the 3rd Century B.C. there has been proof that the Indian and the Arabian merchant ships have travelled from Southern Arabia to Malabar Coast and returned back to Arabia (Seland, 2013; Guan,



2016)

Figure 1: A significant destination in the Indian Ocean and the Maritime Silk RouteThe blue lines indicate the Maritime Silk Route(Source : Wikimedia,2010)

According to the Historians, the long distant sea trade activities that took place between Egypt and the Mesopotamian civilizations gradually declined during the 1000B.C. The group that engaged in the sea trade activities in the Indian Ocean during the second half of the 1st Century B.C. comprised of Greek and Roman salesmen. The historical document which was known as the “Periplus of the Erythraean Sea” gives the information regarding the ports, nations and the types of goods and commodities exchanged in trade activities of the Indian Ocean region. Among that information are the details about East Africa and India. This provides ample evidence in understanding that the merchants of the Mediterranean have reached an already developed sea trade zone to promote their products (Chaudhuri,1985 ; Matthew,2011).

The merchants of China and East Asia have carried out sea trade activities with India whereas India has also exported many commodities while importing metals of higher value such as silver, copper and gold. With the coins belonging to the Maurya tradition, Persia, Rome and the Han dynasty in China, it was proven that the East and the West have been prominent zones for inter-exchanges. Clothing, clay vessels, metallic items, glass, pearls, aromatic items, rare furniture, spices, stones and corals have been the common goods that have been transported in the Indian Ocean region. With that, the Indian and the Sri Lankan ports that are located in the Indian Ocean region have been considered as a major center for the exchange of goods and commodities of China from the East whereas goods of Greece, Persia and Rome from the West (Carswell&Prickett,1980 ; Siriweera,2013 ; Silva,2013 ; Kelegama,2014).

Sri Lanka, having its geostrategic location in the centre of the international maritime route has been playing its role as a sea port for mooring merchant ships, center for providing assistance for merchant ships and a center for inter-exchanges as for the evidences provided by historical and archaeological artifacts. As a result of the abundance of a numerous amount of raw materials available in Sri Lanka such as gems, stones, elephant tusks and spices, Sri Lanka has become an idyllic destination from the ancient times whereas Sri Lanka has also been renowned as a major hub for imports with the demand that prevailed among the royals of the country and the feudal political system for luxurious commodities (Ranawella,2014 ; Silva,2008 ; Ranasinghe&Chandima,2012 ; Silva,2013 ; Siriweera,2013, Ranasinghe,2013).

From the pre-historic era, there have been maritime activities that were progressing over the years between India and Sri Lanka as India being a mass landscape and Sri Lanka being an island. With the rapid growth of the population and the emergence of ports near estuaries and gulfs, the development of the technology used in introducing marine vessels are among the main reasons for the country to be a globally recognized ship mooring station. For the last 3000 years, there have been mini vessels and larger merchant ships coming from Asian regions such as China and Malaysia and Arabian regions such as Rome. Some ports among these developed into the establishment of specific centers in the Maritime Silk Route and the city of Manthai in Sri Lanka is one such commercial cities established in Sri Lanka (Perera,1992 ; Siriweera, 2013 ; Silva,2013 ; Kelegama,2014 ; Ranawella,2014 ; Sirisena, 2016).

A popular region trespassed by the merchant ships that were sailing from China when reaching the trade zone around the Indian Ocean is Thailand. The goods of Thailand also known as Siam have been transported to India and Sri Lanka through the Chinese merchants. The purpose of this study has been to find out the historical phenomena related to the sea trade activities between Sri Lanka, the Indian Ocean region and China that prevailed from the ancient times as well as to find out the incidents that directed in the construction of the modern Kra Canal.

Kra Canal Route and Ancient Trade Activities in the Indian Ocean

Kra Canal is the main transportation route used by the Chinese merchants to transport goods in the Indian Ocean through the ancient sea routes. This canal is situated in the narrowest place that separates the Andaman Sea and the Gulf of Thailand towards the Malay hemisphere which is also known as the Kra Isthmus (Figure 1). During the 4th and the 5th Century A.D. It has been found that 12 ports including Takuapa, Tavoy, Ranong and Singgora have been operated adjoining the existing sea routes (Kit,2012 ; Kinder,2007). It can be assumed that these ports have been used by the Chinese merchant ships as mooring station during the contemporary time.

From the results obtained by the Siam Society on the archaeological investigations, it has been clarified that crossing the Kra Canal for transportation purposes was chosen over crossing through the Sea Strait of Malacca that entailed a numerous amount of accidents for the merchant ships in the route from the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean (Thongsin, 2002; Dobbos, 2016; Chen & Kumagi, 2016). From the archaeological information provided by the Siam Council in 1930 it was revealed that travelling through the narrow land area across the Kra Isthmus was chosen than travelling through the high risk zone of the India Ocean. According to a report by John Crawford, elephants have been used as a mode of transportation in the land areas across the Kra Isthmus and smaller vessels have been used to cross the minor canals while 5-8 days were taken to cross these areas by them (Chen & Kumagi, 2016).

Although there have been various proposals as to broaden this natural reservoir for the ease of travelling by the huge merchant ships, the ancient kings of Thailand such as King Narai of Ayutthaya (1629 A.D – 1688 A.D) and King Rama I (1782 A.D. – 1809 A.D.) have initiated the discussion of the restoration of the Kra Canal (Kit,2012). The historical investigations proved that this idea of restoring the Kra Canal has come into consideration at various points during the 19th Century. As a result of that during the reign of King Rama III also known as King PhraNangklao (1824 A.D. – 1851 A.D.), King Rama IV also known as King Mongkut (1851 A.D.



– 1868 A.D.) and King Rama V also known as King Chulalongkorn (1868 A.D. – 1910 A.D.), the Europeans have communicated the idea of KraCanl for Siam. With the displeasure of the Siamese about Europe’s involvement in the position of Kra Canal, the proposal to restore the Kra Canal has been dismissed (Figure 3) (Thongsin,2002 ; Dobbos.2016 ; Chen & Kumagi,2016).

One of the most successful kingdoms of Thailand was the kingdom of Ayutthaya or Ayodhya that was established in the

1350 A.D. whereas Thailand has been known as Siam during this time. The city of Ayutthaya has been situated in a rich fertile land near the Chao Phraya River and this city has been flourishing as one of the greatest nations in the East during the 15th Century B.C. By the 16th Century B.C.



Figure 3: The proposed canal through the Kra Isthmus at different stages starting from 1850 (Dobbos, 2016)

Ayutthaya has become a prominent trade center in the zone. As a result of these, the Portuguese and the Dutch have landed to Siam by the 16th Century B.C. With the rapid development of the sea trade activities that occurred with the arrival of these nations for Siam, the need for broadening the Kra Canal across the Kra Isthmus arose. The idea of this arose for the first time during the reign of King Narai by the French engineer called M. De Lamar and he has also shown the possibility of constructing a road linking Songkhla in Thailand and Tavoy in Burma. The idea was also dismissed due to the existence of a mountainous region in Kra Isthmus (Thongsin, 2002; Dobbos, 2016)

Sea Strait of Malacca is one of the busiest sea straits in the modern time. This sea strait is located adjoining the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean. With the consequent development of the modern world in various spheres with the progress of globalization, economic unification and the dispersion of international trade activities, there has been a remarkable growth in the international transportation methods. Although there is a disruptive growth in the maritime transportation systems, there is a huge traffic among the marine vessels and as a result of that, many threats such as collision between vessels, threats from smugglers, the increase of marine pollution and the threats caused for the marine life are among the major threats that are caused. As for Napa and the team (2008) it was found that the restoration of the Kra Canal can be used as an alternative solution in order to avoid the threats caused for the marine bio-diversity.

Conclusion

In the ancient world, the main sea trade route that linked the East and the West is the Maritime Silk Route. The development of this sea route has been progressing over the years from the late Century B.C. and one of the notable features have been that the merchants of the East and the West have brought their goods and commodities to the ports near the Indian Ocean region whereas they have exchanged the items at the same place. As a result of that, several commercial cities that aided in the services for the sailors of Sri Lanka and India were created. Similarly, the Kra Canal which was situated in the Southern Thailand has been equally important as same as that of the Sea Strait of Malacca which was used to transport goods and commodities from the East Asia to China and Japan for the ports in the Indian Ocean region. The significant factor for the Kra Canal to be of major importance in the trade and transportation activities was the absence of threats for the sailors in crossing the Sea Strait of Malacca. Although it was evident that there has been modern approaches proposed for the development of the Kra Canal, from the 4th Century B.C. the Kra Canal has been recognized as a trade route that adjoined two oceans as concluded by this research study. Moreover, it can also be stated that through the development project of broadening the Kra Canal, a nation like Sri Lanka which is situated in the centre of the Indian Ocean can be strategically utilized so as to get the benefits as a center for inter-exchanges and maritime services. Through this research it is thus concluded that the geostrategic importance of the Kra Canal is found in the written history.

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