

# Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka

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@ The old name 'Ceylon', with its colonial implications, has been substituted with Sri Lanka or Lanka. -  
Ed. SR

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THE LEGENDS ABOUT THE GREAT heroes in the past are an old recognized source of information. A man who has made his mark upon a generation and who overtops the rest by bravery, piety or some other peculiar powers of mind and body becomes among the masses the source and subject of a legend. However exaggerated, or complicated a legend might be, says Sir Alfred Lyall, it is based on a kernel of truth.<sup>1</sup> At times, the attending circumstances make the situation complicated. This is what exactly happened in the case of the legend of Guru Nanak's visit to Sri Lanka.

It appears certain that soon after the death of Guru Nanak in 1539, there grew up a legend of his visit to Sri Lanka. That it was prevalent among the Sikhs is proved by the fact that before compiling the *Adi Granth*, Guru Arjun sent a person to Sri Lanka to bring the *Pran Sangli*, a work supposed to have been composed and left in Ceylon by the founder of Sikhism. According to Bhai Santokh Singh, the *Pran Sangli* was brought to Amritsar, but Guru Arjun did not find it genuine and hence did not include it in the *Adi Granth*, the Sikh Scripture. However, some unknown person recorded an account of the route leading to Lanka on the fly-leaf of a copy of the *Adi Granth*. This was done without the approval of Guru Arjun. This account is entitled "*Haqiqat Rah Muqam Raja Shiv Nabh ki*".

*Haqiqat Rah Muqam Raja Shiv Nabh ki* is most confusing and full of self-contradictions. With the exception of the description of the route given there, no other information regarding Lanka appears to be correct. It has been stated there that Raja Mayadune (A.D. 1521-1531)<sup>3</sup> was a grandson of Raja Shivnabh whom Guru Nanak met. Mayadune was from polygamous mother and his grandfather is not known to history. He must be some unknown person because the kingdom at Sitawala was established by Raja Mayadune. Moreover, his grandfather could not be a contemporary of Guru Nanak.

It has been stated that the grandfather of Mayadune conquered the 'seven kingdoms' and established his sway over the whole of Lanka. It was not the grandfather of Mayadune, but his son Raja Singh (1581-1592) A.D.<sup>4</sup> who conquered the whole of Lanka, pushed the Portuguese to Colombo seaport, and he has been described by European writers as Ceasar or Napoloean of Lanka.<sup>5</sup>

It has been stated in the *Haqiqat Rah Muqani* that Guru Nanak established a big *Sangat* at Sitawaka and made its ruler his disciple. But the kingdom of Sitawaka never existed before A.D. 1521 and Guru Nanak's visit to Lanka is most probably near about A.D. 1510. At that time the kingdom of Sitawaka did not exist.

During the summer of 1969 the writer of these lines was deputed by the Punjabi University to visit Lanka in order to study and explore the probability of Guru Nanak's visit to that island. Since there is a definite mention of the Guru's visit to Lanka in various traditional accounts of his biography (*Janamsakhis*) it was deemed necessary to study the entire position from the historical point of view.

It is almost certain, and agreed to by all authorities, that Guru Nanak could not have visited Lanka before 1500, and the probable year of his visit to that island would come to be about 1510. It is, therefore, important to study the political condition of Lanka in the opening of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and understand the cultural trends prevailing there at that time. There were three fairly large kingdoms and several vassal states. The principal kingdom to which other states were nominally subservient was the Sinhalese kingdom situated in the south-west, with its capital at Kotte (near modern Colombo). The second Sinhalese kingdom, the Kandyan Kingdom, was situated in the central highland region with its capital first at Campola and later after 1540 at Kandy. The third kingdom was a Tamil kingdom in north Lanka.<sup>6</sup> It included the Jaffna Peninsula, the coastal areas, as far as Mannor, and many of the adjacent islands. Its capital was Nuallur, near Jaffna town. The vassal states consisted of several isolated communities each under the control of a chief who was bound by allegiance either to the Tamil kingdom or to the Kandyan kingdom.<sup>7</sup> These vassal states were found in the extensive Vanni District, south of the Jaffna Peninsula and along the east coast. These vassal states were seven in number. Their names were: 1) Mullativa, 2) Trincomali, 3) Batticaloa, 4) Kottiyar, 5) Palugama, 6) Panam, and Yala.<sup>8</sup>

The political condition of Sri Lanka in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century bore the marks of Indian immigration which had been going on for several centuries. It is significant to note that the island of Sri Lanka, though separated from India by a narrow strip of sea, had been a part of India, culturally and historically. The sixth chapter of the *Mahavamsa* gives an account of Vijaya, an Aryan king, most probably belonging to north-east of India entering Lanka in 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. with his seven hundred followers from the north of India. The present Sinhala inhabitants consider themselves the descendants of Vijaya. They were converted to Buddhism during king Ashoka's period,<sup>9</sup> about 271 B.C. to 235 B.C. There have been a number of Tamil immigrants from the south India's since India immemorial. The immigrants were Hindus Saivites. Sir William Jones writes about an ancient Hindu temple at Trincomali which was destroyed by the Portuguese in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. "This island was peopled, time out of memory, by the Hindu race, the temple which stood at Trincomali is not to be forgotten. It would have remained for the present day a venerable relic, had not the misguided religious zeal of the Portuguese razed it to ground in 1622 to supply material to one of their fortifications."<sup>10</sup>

In the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the Chola dynasty emerged as the dominant power in South India. The Chola King, Parantaka I, invaded Lanka in 945 and won the title, 'Conqueror of Madura and Ceylon.'<sup>11</sup> In 1002, Rajaraja, the Great was able to establish his government at Polonnurva in Lanka. Lanka's king Sena retired towards the south-west leaving northern Lanka and eastern coast in the hands of the Tamils.

It was during this period that the worshippers of Siva took refuge in Lanka – in fear of Mahmud of Ghazni who destroyed the temple of Somnath.<sup>12</sup> The Chola rule continued uptill 1120. For a short interval, Parkarma Bahu the Great (1135-1186) of Ceylon recovered the lost independence. His mother, however, was a Pandyan princess and his sister was married to the prince of Kalinga whose descendants succeeded him and ruled up to 1235. Again, Sundra Pandya (1235-1270 A.D.) was able to establish his rule in Ceylon and exact tributes from the Ceylonese kings. In 1310 a civil war broke out in Pandya which was soon followed by the Muslim invasion of Malik Kafur. As a result of it the great Pandya Empire crumbled. Tamil dominations in Lanka had deep effect for Ibin Batuta who visited Lanka in 1344 A.D. He writes that the Tamil king of north Lanka was Aryachak Arvarti, "a powerful ruler who owned pirates, vessels and who was a cultured man who could converse in

Persian.<sup>13</sup> After the fall of the Pandya Empire the Vijaynagar Empire rose in South India in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Jaffna was again conquered by Harihara II(1379 -14) Ray II (1421-48), one of the greatest rulers of Vijaynagar, exacted tribute from all chieftains of northern Lanka.<sup>14</sup> Thus under the pressure of circumstances created by incessant Tamil invasion of Lanka, the Sinhala kings left their ancient capitals, Anradpura and Polonurwa, and occupied the strongholds further down the south. This led to the rise of the Jaffna kingdom in the north and several vassal states along the eastern coast of Lanka which we find in the opening of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Cultural Impact of Tamil Domination:**

Upto the 16<sup>th</sup> century the cult of Siva had been popular with Tamil immigrants in Lanka. The princes and people belonging to the south of India were mostly Saivites. During the Chola domination of Lanka Saivism spread far and wide and numerous Siva temples were built.<sup>15</sup> The Cholas were such staunch Saivites that they persecuted the followers of Vaishnavism as is evidenced by the instance of Vaishnava scholar and saint, Ramanuj who was compelled to flee to Mysore to live in exile. The Pandya rulers were equally staunch in Saivism. According to Farquhar, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Saivites of the South developed their teaching into a philosophical system which was called "Siva Sidhanata"<sup>16</sup> Thus Lanka under the domination of Chola and Pandya rulers had great cultural impact. The people and the ruler of kingdom of Jaffna, as well as those of the vassal states on the eastern coast of Lanka, were Saivites in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Raja Shivnabh:**

In the Janamsakhis it has been stated that Guru Nanak met Raja Shivnabh. The very name indicates that the Guru met a Saivite Raja. The study of names given in the Janamsakhi indicates that at several places only the caste, occupation, race or faith is given in order to indicate the person of that class. For example:

- (i) Mardana went to the house of an Uppal. Here Uppal is a caste.
- (ii) Pathans became followers of the Guru. Here Pathan is a race.
- (iii) Karoria came to see the Guru. Here Karoria is a revenue official.
- (iv) A Sarewarha met the Guru. Here Sarewarha means a Jain (shaven) monk.

So here Raja Shivnabh does not appear to be a proper name. It indicates a Saivite Raja – a Raja who was a follower of Siva. The ruling princes of Lanka in the opening of the 16<sup>th</sup> century were either Saivites or Buddhists. There were two powerful Sinhala kingdoms with their capitals at Kotte and Campola (Kandy). The rulers of these states were adherents of Buddhism. The third was the Jaffna kingdom with its capital at Nullure. Its ruler was a Saivite. Besides, the rulers of the vassal states on the eastern coast were Saivites. Guru Nanak must have met some Tamil Hindu Saivites ruler of Lanka.

### **Probable place visited by the Guru:**

One of the possibilities is that the ruler of the Jaffna kingdom, who was a Saivite, met the Guru. The ruler of Jaffna in those days was Pararaja Sekarn (1478-1519). According to Dr. Pillay, certain saints and mystics were honoured at his court. Some of these saints came from south India.<sup>17</sup> The author of "Cultural History and Principles of Hinduism", Dr. C. Sivaratnam<sup>18</sup> argued with the writer of these lines that the Raja of Jaffna might have invited Guru Nanak to his kingdom as the Raja of Jaffna was related to the Raja of

Rameshwaram.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Jaffna was geographically the nearest place to India. But this may not be correct as we do not get its confirmation from any other source.

In case we leave aside Jaffna, it is probable that the Guru might have met one of the rulers of seven vassal states on the eastern coast of Lanka. Mullaittiva was in the Jaffna Peninsula and was not so attractive to the Indian immigrants, perhaps due to geographical reasons. This whole belt was a dry area with no rainfall. This is one of the reasons that population density there was so low.<sup>20</sup> Panama and Yala were in the extreme south-east and there is little likelihood that their rulers would have met the Guru. Out of the other four states, viz. Trincomali, Kottiyar, Batticuloa and Balugama, Batticuloa offers the greatest possibility. According to Giani Gian Singh, the author of *Twarikh Guru Khalsa* (Punjabi), Guru Nanak met the ruler of Mattia Kulam south of Trincomali. Batticuloa is eighty-three miles south of Trincomali. According to the Batticula monograph published by the Lankan Government, the modern name Batticuloa was given by the Dutch during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and prior to that the place was known by its Tamil name '*Mudda Kulapa*'<sup>21</sup> which is a synonym of 'Mattya Kulam'. Both the names mean 'muddy lagoon.'

Whatever may be the other contents of *Haqiqat Rah Muqam Raja Shivnabh Ki*, its main purpose, as its title indicates, was to give an account of the route leading to the place of Raja Shivnabh. It has been stated in the '*Haqiqat*':

qhw (nwgwptn) qy lok jhwz cVqw hY  
iqn idn iqn rwq ivc j&nwptn pwr kw bMdr hY qw jwie auqrdw hY [

(people often embark on a ship from Nagapatnam (near Tanjore) and in three days and three nights the ship reaches a sea-port beyond Jaffna). It clearly implies that the place of Raja Shivnabh is beyond Jaffna and was at the distance of three day journeys from Nagapatnam (Distt. Tanjore, South India). When Vascode Gama came to India via Cape of Good Hope in 1498 A.D. he went to Lanka also. An unknown writer on the ship of Vasco de Gama kept a diary which was published under the title "*Journal of the first Voyage of Vasco de Gama*" in the Journal of Ceylon Branch of *Royal Asiatic Society in 1908*.<sup>22</sup> In its appendix A, it has been stated that Ceylon "is eight days journeys from Calecut". It is well known that the first port occupied by the Portuguese in Ceylon was Colombo. So it implies that distance from Calicut to Colombo was covered in eight days. If we calculate in the same way, we come to the conclusion that a ship of those days could cover about one third of that distance in three days from Nagapatnam and reach near the place Batticulao on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka.

According to the Monograph on Batticuloa published by the Ceylon Government, Batticuloa was one of the earliest Aryan settlements in Ceylon with its history going back to the Epic Age. It has been stated there:

"Investigations of the ruins and inscription in the neighbourhood, supported by local tradition, leave no doubt that the Batticuloa District had its share in the events related by early Indian traditions about Ceylon. In the *Skanda Purana*, mention is made of Katiramalai, now known as Katirgala, a hill 1,068 feet high lying sixteen miles south-west of Batticuloa. The next reference is found in the *Ramayana*. According to this poem, Ravana, the formidable enemy of Rama, had his fortress at the now submerged Basse Roack (Ravan Kotai) and a temple at Tirukoil. He often plied his chariot between this fortress and Tirukonesar temple at Trincomali. The same poem contains the story of how Hanuman, the monkey-god, burnt his tail in the firing of the Patnas at the instance of Rama, who was intent on destroying the whole island. He put out the fire, however, by dipping his tail in a

pool in Lanka. Tradition tells us that it was at Amritakali,<sup>23</sup> two miles from Batticaloa on the Bard Road, that Hanuman put out the fire of his trail. An important festival is held there to commemorate the event every year on the new moon day of the Hindu month Aadi, i.e. early part of August.<sup>24</sup>

Batticaloa appears to be an older settlement than Jaffna as it has been stated in the monograph:

“The occupation of Batticaloa by the Tamils is said to have been earlier than that of Jaffna: the latter was not inhabited until the blind minstrel brought colonists from the Pandiya kingdom.”<sup>25</sup>

**With the help of Archeological Department of the Government of Ceylon, I toured the Batticaloa District to find out if there was any tradition of Guru Nanak’s visit there. Fortunately, I was able to locate a village named Kurukul Madap, about twenty miles south of Batticaloa proper. The villagers told me that the village was founded in the memory of Sidh Guru Nath who came here from North India about 450 years ago. He is still remembered and revered by the people living there. A Siva temple has been built there where he sat. The name of the village ‘Kurukul Madap’ is a Tamil name which means ‘Guru’s village’.**

Recently I learn that, from this area, an inscription has been discovered mentioning the name of ‘*Nanak Acharya*’. Is there any date on it and what are its other contents? Regarding these matters, further investigation is being made. A few months ago a letter dated Jan. 20, 1969 was received from the Honorary Secretary of Kurukul Madap Social, Cultural and Economic Welfare Society, Kurukul Madap, intimating that its inhabitants intended to celebrate the 500<sup>th</sup> Birth Anniversary of “Jagat Guru Nath of India”.<sup>26</sup>

All this information leads us to the conclusion that Guru Nanak must have visited the Batticaloa kingdom and the village Kurukul Madap. But, unfortunately, the name of the raja of Batticaloa near about 1510 A.D. is not available. Also, no record of the seven kingdoms on the eastern coast of Sri Lanka in the early sixteenth century is available, except that these rulers were the descendants of Wannichi Rani about whom it has been stated in chapter V “Modern History” of the *Monograph of Batticaloa District*:

“1433 to 1477 A.D. A Vannichhi is said to have reigned over Panichchenkarni and her descendants from 1477 to 1552 A.D.”. About ‘Panichchenkarni’: it has been stated in a foot note: “Ribeyro says that there was a kingdom formerly near Balany which was called Soul (Cholae), which extended three leagues along the coast and two leagues inland, but it was submerged and changed into bed of salt. Mr. Leo in his translation identified it with Panichchenkarni. The tradition is that a Vannichi reigned here.”



### Reference

1. Sir Alfred Lyall: *Asiatic Studies* (Religious & Social), Vol. vi, London, 1899, page 326.
2. *Suraj Parkash*, Ras 3, Ansu 32.
3. *Ceylon Gazetteer*, Simon Casier, Chitty, 1831, page 60-67.
4. *Ceylong Gazetteer*, Simon Casier, Chitty, 1834, p. 60-67.
5. *History of Ceylon, Portugese and Dutch*, period, Father S.G. Perera, Colombo, page 60 “..... The wars which he waged against them echoed his fame beyond the limits of the island. The Portugese describe him a mighty general endowed with military genius akin to that of Hannibal, Alexander and Ceasar.”
6. *Hinduism in Ceylon*, Rev. James Cartman, Colombo, 1957, p. 41.
7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*
9. *Early History of Buddhism in Ceylon*, Dr. E.W. Adikaram, H.D. Gunasenam 1953, p. 51-52.
10. *Ceylon Literary Register*, (September 24, 1886), Volume I, No. 7 page 63.
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Hinduism in Ceylon*, page 28
13. Ibin Bututa, *Travels in Asia and Africa*, 1963, London, page 255.
14. *Hinduism in Ceylon*, page 34.
15. *Hinduism in Ceylon*, page 34.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *South India and Ceylon*, K.K. Pillay, University of Nadra, 1963, p. 136.
18. Dr C. Sivaratnam has also mentioned this in his book: See *Cultural History and Principle of Hinduism*, p. 119.
19. Sri Ramanatha Swamy Temple has very close ties with Ceylon. A portion of its temple was built by a Raja of Ceylon in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, vide *Rameshwarma* published by Rameshwaram Temple, p. 8 & 9.
20. S.F. De Silva, *A Regional Geography of Ceylon*, page 226, (Population Map of Ceylon).
21. *A Monograph on Batticalao*, opening para of Chapter I Topography.
22. *Journal of Ceylon Branch of Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. XIX-1906-7. Colombo 1908, p. 321.
23. The writer visited this village. The tradition of Hanuman's exploits is still prevalent there.
24. *Monograph of the Batticalao District*, opening para of Chapter III.
25. The para No. 6 of Chapter III, "Ancient History", Monograph of Batticaloa
26. "It is with pleasure that we take this opportunity of informing you that the above society will lay the foundation of the Gurunath Memorial Library at Kurukal Madap on the 500<sup>th</sup> birth anniversary of 'Jagat Guru Nath'. It is believed that Jagat Guru Nath of India visited this village and lived here. You have also visited this village when you were in Ceylon last year."

