ECONOMIC HISTORY IN MEDIEVAL SRI LANKA

(FROM 1232 A. D. TO 1467 A. D.)

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FGS/03/01/04/2008/01

Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for the Degree of Philosophy in History

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Sri Lanka

July 2017
Abstract

As a consequence of the shift of the kingdoms to the South-west due to the political dilemma which occurred during the first half of the 13th century AD, substantial changes took place in every field. This research study examined the nature, changes which were taken place and the special characteristics of the economy of Sri Lanka from 1232 A.D. to 1467 A.D. It is undoubted that the functioning of political and social organization affect the formation of the economy. Hence, a brief discussion on those fields were also included. Economy of the country during this period of time had been based on two streams, namely agriculture and trade. Although there were no large scale irrigation works, wet land cultivation and chena cultivation were carried out. Rain water and small streams were used as sources of water supply for agriculture. In addition to paddy, other grains, vegetables etc. were cultivated in chenas and home gardens. Cattle rearing were also carried out for agriculture and other purposes. Coconut cultivation was also popular during this period. Therefore, it can be said that Sri Lankans were engaged agriculture as their main livelihood during this time. Apart from agriculture, the other noteworthy aspect of the economy was trade. Internal trade and international trade were important aspects of trade. Trade was carried out in almost all the areas of the island either mainly through barter system or to some extent by using money as a medium of exchange. Traders, both local and foreign, were able to carry out trading actively by transporting the goods which were imported from foreign countries by using thavalams and boats. International trade was more developed during this period. One of the main attractions, apart from goods such as pearls, precious stones, elephants which were exported by Sri Lanka since the ancient times, was spices. There was high demand for cinnamon and pepper from overseas countries. Another reason for the development of trade activities was the involvement of Muslim traders in trade. All ports in Southern and Western Sri Lanka played very important role in trade. Another special feature during this time was the formation of commercial cities near ports and the establishment of dwellings of foreign traders and naval officers in these cities facilitating the development of trade. Various weights and measures were used in trading activities. These factors indicate that during the Medieval Period, Sri Lankans tried to maintain a self-sufficient agricultural economy while Sri Lanka was a trading center where traders from the East and the West met. This resulted in Sri Lanka becoming an important center of import-export trade.

Keywords: Agriculture, Economic System, Medieval Period, Sri Lanka, Trade