

Keynote Address at the
International Conference on Land Transportation, Locomotive Heritage and Road Culture -2017
Centre for Heritage Studies
University of Kelaniya

Transport and the Shaping of Sri Lanka's History

Amal S. Kumarage

Senior Professor, Department of Transport & Logistics Management
University of Moratuwa
amalk@uom.lk

History is shaped by diverse factors among them the access to land, its occupation and use. Sri Lanka's own history underlines the impact that emerging transport technology had on government, settlement and trade. Being an island country, the influences of maritime transport have had the greatest impact spanning several centuries. Thus, the Chinese, the Indians, the Malays and later the Europeans all left their mark on shaping Sri Lanka's economy and culture. Much has been discovered on the ports and the maritime economy that made Sri Lanka and its geographical location important to the world over the years.

Much less is documented on the land transportation that connected these ports and the capital cities that rose and fell with the different kingdoms and Chola invasions. The nature of the use of waterways and the horse tracks connecting the length and breadth of the land is also yet to be fully understood. The development of internal transport technology in ancient Sri Lanka and its global comparison is an area of immense research importance to determine its contribution to the formation of our history.

Modern Sri Lanka is also intensely shaped by transport technology. The current economic concentration in the Western Province stems from the strategic use of Colombo as the gateway to Europe and its internal connectivity to a network of over 200 km of inland waterways including canals, lakes and rivers. The spice and coconut industries that supported this export economy continue even to-date as a significant economic contributor. The emergence of Colombo as the modern capital of Sri Lanka was further consolidated with the subsequent hubbing of land transport networks centered on Colombo and the port. The opening of new land to further develop the export economy of value to the Europeans was the primary basis for the development of the railway and subsequently the road transport networks. The attention on accessing the hill country and the neglect of areas of traditional economies such as paddy farming especially in the dry zone meant that transport technology was a key means that led to the shaping of the current economic and social profile within Sri Lanka including the inequities arising from same.

The post-independence period in Sri Lanka saw rural road construction as a means of redressing these issues followed up with an extensive bus transport network that in many ways restored the quality of rural living. If indeed such measures contributed towards Sri Lanka not having experienced the global trend of heavy urban migrations in the latter part of the 20th century remains unexplored. At the same time, the political focus on rural access was not without negative issues, as both urban transport and inter-regional transport infrastructure stagnated for several decades. It is only in the last two decades that a new highway network is being built. However, if the planning of such a network is adequately visionary to exploit new economic opportunities including the promotion of domestic trade is not well understood. The neglect of urban transport technologies including upgrading of rail and bus transport has resulted in the depletion of quality of urban life and economic competitiveness. The recent attention on public transport including the railways and bus transport augurs well for restoring a more sustainable development of transport in Sri Lanka.