

Glory of Galle Port

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Sri Lanka's harbours have been popular in the world since ancient times and the port of Galle in the Southern Province is one of them. The port is in a natural bay. On one side of it is the Rumassala Range and on the other is the Galle Fort.

Ancient records show that there was a large rock formation in the area before the construction of the Galle Fort. Due to its proximity to the Silk Road (a network of trade routes connecting China and the Far East with the Middle East and Europe), its natural beauty, and ease of access to facilities and merchandise, the port became well-known to foreign traders.

Historical information

During the Anuradhapura period this area was known as 'Gimhatiththa'. It is also mentioned in the Culavamsa. During that period, Western sailors also called the port of Galle as 'Tarshish' and 'Kala'. It appears that the Arabs used the name 'Kala' for Galle during the reign of King Harun Al Rashid (Caliph) in Baghdad. Known as a trading city since ancient times, Galle may have been Tarshish, the great trading city of South Asia mentioned in the Bible, according to some scholars.

International trade community

Archaeologist H.C.P. Bell had found excellent evidence of the connection between Galle and the international trade community in the 4th century AD. It was in 1888 that about 300 Roman coins were found in the port of

Galle. The fact that these coins, which are difficult to find even in European countries, were found in Sri Lanka is considered a significant event.

Of these coins, about 200 did not have clear notes and only a few of them had readable notes. These coins depict kings, queens and young chief kings who reigned from 317 to 326 AD, from the time of Emperor Pluvius Julius Crispus to 423 AD.

The city of Galle is also mentioned by Cosmas Indicoplasts, an Egyptian explorer in 540 AD. Some believe that the port of Galle was the historic 'Tarshish' port where ivory, peacocks and other valuables were imported from various countries at that time. Sources say those traders from Egypt, Arabia and Persia on one hand and India, China and the islands of Java on the other came to Galle and bought various items.

Archaeologists have also unearthed a granite-made anchor in the harbour of Galle. Archaeologists believe that such anchors were used around 1000 CE. It is also reported that such an anchor had been found in a port in Oman earlier.

Portuguese and Dutch eras

At the behest of the Portuguese Governor of Goa, Francisco de Almeida, his son Lorenzo de Almeida set out to capture the Arabian ships. At that moment, he strayed from the opposite direction, and by chance he heard a rooster crowing at dawn. He had arrived at the Galle harbour. This is also mentioned in the writings of historians such as Burroughs and Kuto. The Portuguese then firmly established their power here.

The port of Galle was annexed by the Dutch after the Portuguese, and in 1640 a letter was handed over to King

Rajasinghe II by the then Dutch Governor Willam Jacobs Coaster, who had conquered the port of Galle.

The letter read, "Currently we only get what the 'Disawe' (a regional officer) gives us. We respectfully request you to hand over to us estates near the Galle Fort and to allow our security forces and ships coming to the port to benefit from the fruits of the trees,"

The writer Johann Jacob Sar, who arrived in Galle on October, 6, 1647, writes of the port of Galle: "There is a very good port here. Ships can be parked there for a whole year. But there are dangerous rocks. So when the new ships arrive, three shots must be fired. If a shot is fired in response to the signal, the captain must wait until an officer from the port arrives. Near the port is a fort called the 'Black Fort', which was first built by the Portuguese. This fort was built by the Portuguese under a false pretense of deceiv-

ing the king of Kandy,"

According to these reports, the port of Galle had become the main port of Ceylon at that time. During that period many merchant ships came to the port annually. In some cases, ships were wrecked and hit by rocks at the bottom of the Galle Harbour, and some of them sank.

During the British era

Even during the British occupation of Ceylon, the Galle Port was the leading harbour in the country, but in time the Colombo Port became the leading harbour. The main reason for this was the completion of the Kandyan railway in 1872, through which tea and other products could be easily transported to the Colombo Port.

The rocks called 'Kapparagala' and 'Matthamade Gala' which tarnished the reputation of the Galle Port at that

time also contributed to this.

In 1879 a letter was sent to the British Government outlining the importance of the Galle Port and the areas to be developed, by various business powers, including the trading companies of Galle. Accordingly, around 1899, the British naval vessel 'Silak' was anchored in the port of Galle, surveying the harbour and searching for rocks on the seabed.

Silak Reef

A previously undiscovered reef was also discovered during that time and was named Silak. At the end of this research a report called 'Silak Report' was published and this exploration was completed in 1907. Many of the issues raised at the time were not resolved and, as a result, the Colombo Port became more popular among sailors than that of Galle.

Work on the new jetty toward Clossenberg Point began in 1959 and was further developed in the 1970s. At present this port is owned by the Sri Lanka Ports Authority. It is used as a freight port as well as a tourist port. This port is the only port in Sri Lanka open to tourist sailing boats and has been world famous for its activities since the 80's. In the 1990s as well as in the early 2000s, it was a common sight to see hundreds of tourist sailing boats parked there at the end of the year.

Due to the tsunami disaster of 2004 and the lack of proper facilities for tourists, those arrivals were reduced. Proposals are afoot to redevelop the port as a friendly facility for tourist sailing boats in the future. Towards this end, the Sri Lanka Navy launched Sri Lanka's first underwater museum at the bottom of the Galle Harbour recently.

