

Development of Jaffna: Pay attention to land and water factors

By A. T. G. A. Wickramasuriya, Retired Deputy Director of Irrigation

This article was published on September 1994 following initiation of peace talks between the PA Government led by Chandrika Kumaratunga and the LTTE.

With the new government extending arms of goodwill and peace to the militant groups of Jaffna, there are renewed signs of hope for lasting peace and reconciliation in the north and east. These signs come not a moment too soon, for we have all suffered long and beyond endurance.

When peace does arrive, it will cry out for prosperity and development, which the north has been denied for many years owing to the conflict situation. There are already many development plans for the Jaffna peninsula and the north in general, many of them prepared by well meaning administrative officers and some by scientists. It is important that these development plans, to be successful, should take into account the peculiar geographic, geomorphological and other scientific factors which seem to govern the land and water resources of the area.

Challenges

Nearly five years ago, the government of that time raised the question, "What form of administration is best suited to resolve the communal problem of Sri Lanka?" The administration of our country concerns human activities and the welfare of the people. This involves not only development of resources, but also to be in a position to face the challenges of natural disasters.

In a newspaper article titled, "What caused the collapse of the ancient engineering works in Sri Lanka?" I have quoted the views expressed by some of our eminent scholars including those of Dr. S. Paranavithana, who stated: "There have, however, been invasions in early times, at least one of them of a much more disastrous nature than the inroads which preceded the end of the Polonnaruwa Kingdom, but the country recouped after the fury of these onslaughts had been spent..."

"The real cause of the dissolution which overtook the northern and south-eastern plains of the island in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, has therefore," said Dr. Paranavithana, "been sought by some in factors beyond the control of man in those days."

In the article mentioned above I have referred to the abnormal floods of 1907, 1947, 1957 and 1978 and the extent of damage and loss caused to life and property. Statistically even worse disasters would have occurred earlier, and can take place at any time in the future.

What then would be the plight of the people, particularly those who live close to the North and the East, if we as one nation were not sufficiently united or prepared to meet such situations or the consequences?

Sri Lanka's geographic location is such that its coastal zone can be, and in fact is seen to be, extremely sensitive to waves, currents, tides and even more to sea level variations that occur periodically. I do not propose to go into the mechanics of these and tidal waves in an article such as this. I can do so at an appropriate forum, where I could support my findings both with field observations and results of experiments on hydraulic models.

Nevertheless, I must say that I hold the view that the shape and form our Island as depicted in some of our old maps cannot be totally ignored, if one considers the state of

Muthurajawala marshes, were in the past prosperous rice fields. Today, they are waterlogged or worse still, have turned into salt marshes. Why?

Further north, for instance in Wilpattu (or Villu-Pathu, meaning 'Lake district'), most of the villus are either dry or contain little water, and that water too is hardly fit for consumption even by the comparatively few beasts that roam the area.

The natural 'Island break waters' located off Puttalam are also known to be steadily shrinking in size, and are on their way to disappearing. Their effectiveness in sheltering Portugal Bay and even the mainland as far

Kingdom is on a large island, extending from east to west fifty yojanas (=distance by bullocks in one day) and from north to south thirty. Left and right from it there are as many as 100 small islands, distant from one another, ten, twenty or even 2001 e; but all subject to the large island..."

Jaffna District

Considering evidence such as this and even more the geological structure of Jaffna Peninsula along with the several islets now existing from it to Delft, it is quite likely that this is all that now remains of the many islands that probably did exist in the distant

south. This is a task which cannot be confined only to surface water, but also to ground water. The latter involves extensive ground water survey at a regional level. In 1980, an "Integrated Rural Development Plan for Jaffna District" was prepared by the District Secretary/ Government Agent. In preparing this Plan, it is on record that "the needs and views of the people of the district were also obtained by a system of consultation... Senior officials of the district visited the people in remote villages ... in finding out conditions in which they lived, their needs and aspirations."

It further notes: "This plan envisages an investment of 750 million rupees over a five-year period and encompasses a wide range of development activities."

There is no doubt that a lot of spadework has been done in an honest attempt to achieve the objects of the exercise. But it is my view that the geography of the Jaffna peninsula and the group of islands is such that, unless serious attention is paid to the adverse oceanographic changes, and necessary thought and action taken, the degree of success that may be achieved by the above Plan will be marginal.

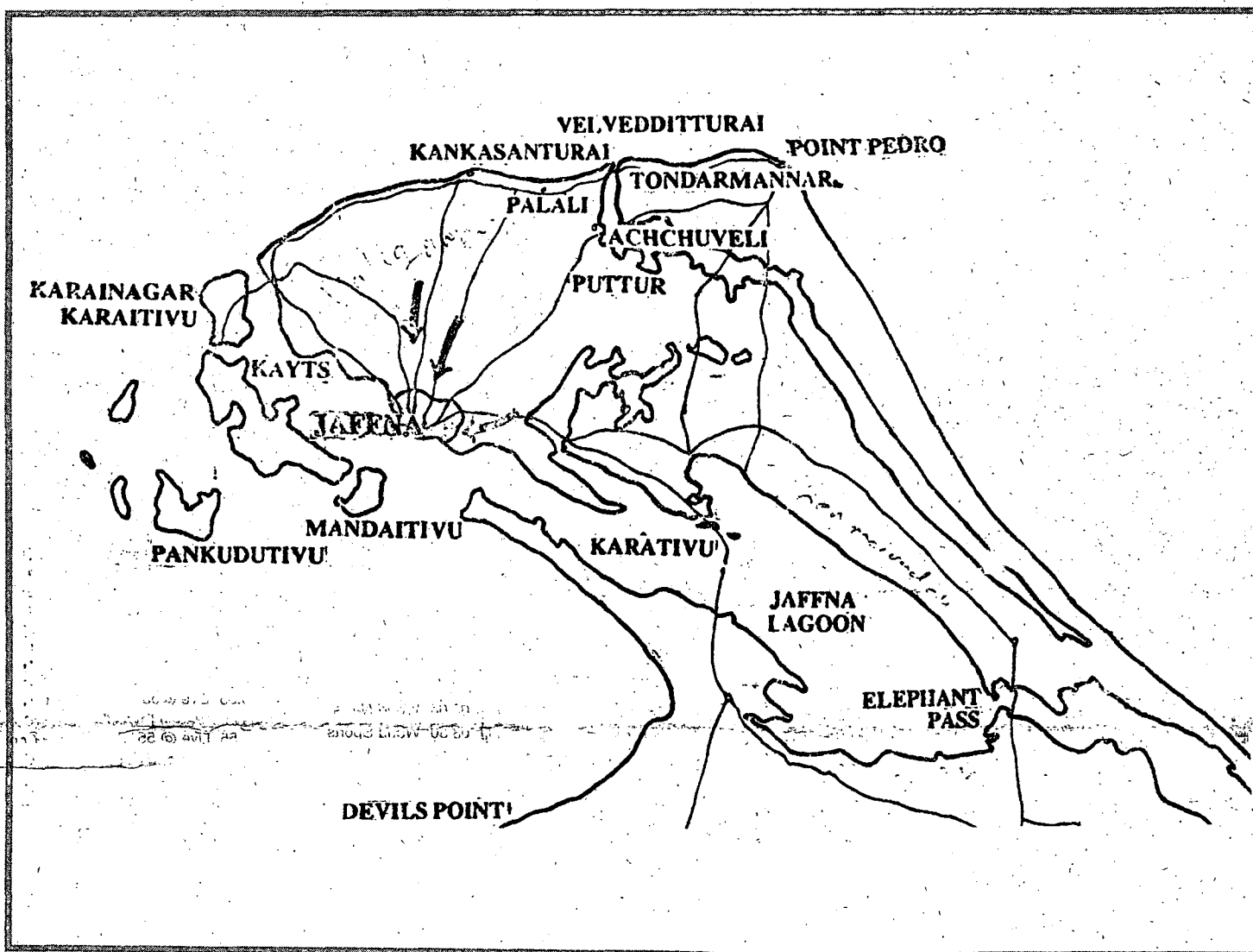
The speech made on the 25th of August 1994 by the Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar in Parliament on the election of the new Speaker is a statement that should go down in history. The following are excerpts from it:

"Mr. Speaker, I wish to join with enthusiasm in the acclamation with which your election to this high office has been received on all sides of this honourable house...everybody has said today and during the past bruising campaign in the country that the one thing that all the peoples of this country want very much, that they yearn for is peace, tranquility and an end to dissension."

"They worked in a manner in which this country can be justifiably proud. I do not think there is a single other democratic country in the world that polls so heavily, and so clearly as we do. That is something that all of us must be always immensely proud of and out of that has come this one great message. Let it never be said, that the Sinhala people are racists. They are not, Mr. Speaker. They are absolutely not and I think this election has demonstrated so handsomely that this particular argument can be laid to rest for ever."

On the heels of peace and reconciliation must come meaningful and effective reconstruction and development of the war ravaged areas of the island. The economic and physical development of Jaffna will be daunting, not only because of the impacts of the war, but also because of the particular natural conditions that prevail there.

The solutions, lie in meeting the challenges of a changing environment. A basic requirement in achieving the best possible answer lies primarily in ensuring a united and undivided Sri Lanka, be it in the north or similar situations in the east or northeast.



imbalance which undoubtedly exists between the land and the sea. The island's size and shape could have changed in an unbelievable way over the centuries.

Decline

Sixty years ago, R. L. Brohier observed and later recorded that Mundel Lake in the Puttalam district was then famous for its abundance of fish. According to Cordiner (1807), about two centuries ago, Mundel was a salt lake about 20 miles, long and 3 miles wide in some places, had an abundance of fish, and was frequented by alligators and wild fowl. But today, its water spread is about quarter of what it was then and its fishery production insignificant. Why?

Thousands of acres of land in the west and east coastal belt, like those at

north as Kuderimali Point is decreasing, and causing problems of flood and drainage in the low lying lands inland in that area.

In the light of the above observations, one cannot dismiss as figments of imagination the various descriptions given by foreign visitors in the bygone days about the island of Ceylon. Two examples:

(a) Cosmos Indicopleustes, a Greek, writing in the sixth century, A.D.: "This is a great island of the ocean, situated in the Indian sea; which is called by the Indians Sriladiva, but, by the Greeks Taprobane, where the jacinth stone is found; and it lies beyond the land of pepper. About it lie many small islands close to one another, in all of which sweet water and coconuts are found."

(b) Fa-hsien, a Chinese scholar, late fourth and early fifth centuries: "The

past. During the late 1960s, I had the opportunity to inspect certain sites in Jaffna, in my capacity as the Senior Deputy Director of Irrigation. I have with me photographic evidence to show that the northern coast of the peninsula is eroding and continues to be so. Apart from the loss of land, this situation has an diverse effect on the quality of ground water on which the economy of the peninsula largely depends.

The situation in the Southern part of the Jaffna District (situated south of Elephant Pass) in the mainland, is certainly much better. But its scope for further development in agriculture will depend not only in the management of its existing irrigation schemes but in attempts to augment the water supplies that are possible only from sources further