



CULTURAL TOURISM POTENTIAL IN THE NORTH CENTRAL PROVINCE OF SRI LANKA*

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ABSTRACT

International tourism has recorded a tremendous growth in the past and this trend will continue further uninterruptedly. Sri Lanka has been one of the major tourist attractions since antiquity. The end of a protracted civil war has been a blessing for the tourist industry and the consequent rapid expansion of tourist infrastructure in the island. Although the island is a small one, it is rich in religious and cultural diversity. Buddhism is the main religion of the majority of people, while Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are also practiced by portions of the population. The resultant rich cultural heritage of the island has been constructed around religious practices, historical monuments and ancient cities, meditation, yoga, folk music and dances, festivities, ceremonies and rituals. Special sites with multi religious attractions reflect the diversity and uniqueness of a rich culture. The North Central Province of Sri Lanka is especially rich in cultural resources owing largely to it housing two cities that served as the island's capital for more than 1000 years in ancient times. Only a small fraction of this vast amount of resources has been utilized by the tourism industry so far. The paper argues that the promotion of religious and cultural tourism products in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka will open up new avenues of engagement for tourists and income generation for the island. Ancient monuments and religious sites, segments of culture tourism, would be magnets to overseas archeologists and Buddhist communities.

Keywords: Buddhism, Culture, Monuments, Religion, Tourists

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Lanka, a mango fruit or tear drop shaped island in the Indian Ocean, is located just below the southern-most tip of India. It is separated from the Indian subcontinent by the thin Palk straight and Gulf of Mannar. The island is also known as Heladiva, Taprobane, Ceylon, the Island of Serendipity or Pearl of Asia. It lies

just above the equator between 5° 55' N and 9° 55' N and between the eastern longitudes 79° 42' and 81° 52'. Sri Lanka covers a total area of 65,610 square km (25,332 square miles) with the coastline extending to cover 1,340 km (833 miles). The maximum length and width of the country is 435 km and 225 km respectively. It is a tropical island exposed to sea breeze and rain, and accommodates land elevation that affords different climatic conditions. The day time average annual temperature in the island as a whole varies from a lowest of 28°C to a highest of 32°C. The mean temperature of the island changes from a cold low of 16°C in Nuwara-Eliya in the Central hilly lands to a high of 32°C in Trincomalee on the Northeastern coast (Wimalaratana 2000).

The annual rainfall distribution is used to divide Sri Lanka into three major agro climatology zones namely the Wet Zone in the southwestern region including central hill country; Dry Zone covering predominantly northern, north central, deep south and eastern parts of the country and Intermediate Zone running between the two major climatic zones. The dry zone covers 63.5 percent of the land mass of the country while the wet and intermediate zones cover 23.2 percent and 13.3 percent respectively. All the major colonial plantation crops- tea, rubber and coconut- are virtually concentrated in the wet zone while huge tracts of rice fields are located in the dry areas of the country. The mixed crop garden consisting of fruits, vegetables, spices and other perennial crops is a common characteristic everywhere in the island even though there are regional variations of products. Administratively the island is divided into 09 Provinces as the first tier and 25 Districts as the second tier. A district is again divided into a number of Divisional Secretary (DS) divisions and it is subdivided into Grama Niladari (GN) divisions, the smallest administrative division. There are 330 DS divisions and 14022 GN divisions

in the country. In addition, the country has 23 municipalities and 41 town councils (Department of Census and Statistics 2012).

The island was home to some 7.5 million people in 1950 and the number had increased to 21 million by 2013. The annual average population growth rate during the same period of time has declined from 3.3 percent to 0.8 percent. The percentage of rural population at the beginning of this period stood at 84.7 percent while the urban population was 15.3 percent. This composition has only changed marginally over a long period of six decades as the country mostly has a rural sector friendly settlement pattern. The population density, however, has increased from 126 to 327 persons per square kilo meter during this period of time (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2013).

Sri Lanka has gradually transformed from a low income country to a lower middle income country over the past sixty years or so. Per capita GDP of the island was US\$ 114 in 1950 and this has increased to US\$ 3280 by 2013 adding around US\$ 49 to the per capita income every year during this long period of time (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2013). Poverty has been the most disturbing factor of Sri Lankan society in the past 60 years or so and its pressure will impact the delicate balance of the society in years to come. Post-independence livelihood development programmes, especially in the domestic agricultural sector, and a number of welfare policies have reduced poverty to a great extent. Household income and expenditure surveys suggest that national poverty headcount ratio stood at 26.1 in 1990/91 and subsequently it has declined to 6.7 in 2012/2013 (Department of Census and Statistics 2014). The overall socio-economic development of the island is better compared to the growth of its per capita income and also to many other developing countries. Currently Sri Lanka stands at 72nd place of

the Human Development index (HDI), out of 187 countries and territories in the world (UNDP 2014).

Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic country. The objective of this paper is to examine the potential of religious and cultural tourism in Sri Lanka to strengthen the economic capacity of the country, paying special attention to the island's resource heritage and its regional diversity. The North Central Province, the cradle of Sri Lankan culture and religion with a recorded history from 6 BC has been selected for this purpose. Secondary data as well as field observations and interviews with key informants have been the major sources of information for this paper.

TOURISM IN SRI LANKA

A dedicated tourism promotion strategy was absent in the country for a long period of time. The economy under British rule revolved around the profitable plantation sector and paid little or no attention to promote the tourism sector which, if tapped, would have proven a great source of income. The colonial administration formed the Government Tourist Bureau in 1937 to provide facilities and services to the large volume of cruise passengers travelling in between the East and West passing the Colombo port. It is estimated that over one hundred thousand passengers received the services and facilities of the Colombo port annually during this period of time. At the onset of the Second World War, however, the number of passenger ships that stopped at the Colombo port declined dramatically and thereby negated the need for a Tourist Bureau.

The Tourist Bureau was revived in 1948, with the political independence of the island. The mode of tourist transport by this time had shifted from sea cruise to airplane and the country was not prepared for this

change. The expansion of the country's only international airport in Colombo was carried out only in the second half of the 1960s and the new terminal building was opened in 1968. The Sri Lanka hotel school as a public entity was incorporated to provide skilled man power to the tourism industry in 1964 and the Ceylon Tourism Board was formed in 1966. The newly formed Ceylon Tourism Board made an all-out effort with many innovative strategies to promote the industry. It was, however, a fruitless exercise as the government was following inward looking and anti-private sector policies until the economic liberalization of 1977. These developments checked the progress of the tourism industry until the end of the civil war in 2009. The Tourism Development Authority was formed in 2005 to promote the industry during the civil war period (Central Bank 2011; 2013).

Now the tourism industry is recording unprecedented rapid progress in the aftermath of the civil war.

"The Sri Lankan tourism industry, being one of the fastest growing industries of the post conflict economy, achieved a multitude of success during 2015." (Central Bank 2015).

Local and foreign investment is constantly flowing into the sector although religious and cultural tourism is not promoted as a special product of the industry. Tourist arrivals are expected to rise exponentially in the near future, as the country is currently enjoying a new era of political stability and security. Additionally, old tourist attractions in the war ravaged areas have been added to the tourism product basket.

Tourist arrivals as well as tourist receipts and hotel room occupancy rates have gone up in the aftermath of the civil war. The trend will continue further along with new investments in the industry and promotional campaigns even though the economic difficulties in Europe and some other countries are

Table 1: Tourist Arrivals by Purpose of Visit

Year	Pleasure		Business		Other		Total
	Arrival	percentage %	Arrival	percentage %	Arrival	percentage %	
2001	300545	89.23	22677	06.73	13572	04.02	336794
2002	335898	85.43	36793	09.35	20480	05.20	393171
2003	404327	80.79	45558	09.10	50553	10.10	500438
2004	442534	78.15	59961	10.59	63707	11.25	566202
2005	382321	69.60	92879	16.90	74108	13.49	549308
2006	392766	70.18	96981	17.33	69856	12.48	559603
2007	331238	67.05	52116	10.54	110654	22.39	494008
2008	321079	73.22	37261	08.49	80135	18.27	438475
2009	358188	79.97	38473	08.58	51229	11.43	447890
2010	516538	78.92	83270	12.72	54668	08.35	654476
2011	663343	77.50	68097	07.96	124535	14.55	855975
2012	748436	74.43	90040	08.95	167129	16.62	1005603
2013	980162	76.90	94320	07.40	200111	15.70	1274593

Source: Central Bank Annual Reports 2011; 2013, Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (n.d.)

constantly checking this progress. However, the growing economies in Asia, especially China and India, give an extra leverage to the industry.

The overwhelming majority of tourists come for leisure purposes, even though their percentage has gone down gradually. The percentage of tourists who are coming for business and other purposes has gone up in the recent past. It is noticeable that there is no special category for the culture and religious tourism sector, despite the fact that a certain percentage of leisure tourists and tourists with other purposes visit culturally and religiously important places. Additionally, all tourists get some degree of exposure to the local culture and religious practices while they stay in the island. Therefore paying special attention to the promotion of cultural tourism will yield handsome payoffs to Sri Lanka's economy.

A certain percentage of inbound tourists go to the North Central Province (NCP) where cultural and religious resources are in abundance. The North Central Province of Sri Lanka is especially rich in religious and cultural resources owing largely to it housing two cities that served as the island's capital for more than 1000 years in ancient times. In this light, the NCP which is located bordering the civil war-affected Northern and Eastern provinces, can expect a decided increase in the number of tourist arrivals in the recent future. The province features a blend of sites important to Buddhist and Hindu cultures, and also ones that trace the rise and fall of successive Sinhala and Tamil powers throughout history. Therefore, promoting the cultural and religious heritage of NCP should not prove too difficult.

Table 2: Number of Foreign Visitors Visiting the Cultural Triangle and Revenue from Sale of Tickets

Year	Total	Collection in Rs. Million
1988	74,062	14.1
1989	79,683	19.2
1990	124,382	44.7
1991	132,641	69.6
1992	153,817	102.3
1993	148,913	149.6
1994	168,402	176.1
1995	166,661	168.7
1996	102,788	121.3
1997	144,517	186.0
1998	165,463	225.0
1999	207,398	300.0
2000	155,167	276.0
2001	129,201	222.0
2002	131,804	242.8
2003	212,521	403.3
2004	246,380	543.1
2005	110,443	284.7
2006	138,232	400.9
2007	104,583	279.8
2008	112,190	307.5
2009	109,404	402.8
2010	197,947	743.5
2011	239,920	998.2
2012	592,980	1,330.7
2013	504,699	1,727.1
2014	627,136	2,178.5

Source: Sri Lanka Tourism Development Authority (n.d.)

NORTH CENTRAL PROVINCE

Sri Lanka has three major communities namely the Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims. Historical records suggest that the modern civilization of Sri Lanka commences from 544 BC with the arrival of people from Bengal of North East India who later evolved to become the Sinhalese. This mass immigration brought a considerable number of people into the island who possessed certain skills, knowledge and culture. History suggests that within a few years of their arrival, these North East Indian people forged royal matrimonial alliances with Dravidian South Indian regions, and also got down craftsmen from South India.

The area in which they settled, and the land mass that consequently became the capital of the Sinhala kingdom during the era extending from the 6th century BC to the middle of the 13th century AD before the kingdom was shifted to the Wet Zone, roughly corresponds with the current NCP. This era is referred to as the ancient period, or alternatively the Anuradhapura-Polonnaruwa or Rajarata period. Many features of the island's present culture and religions have their roots in this ancient period.

The stretch of landmass that comes under the modern North Central Province (NCP) belonged to Rajarata (the land of kings) during the pre-European period. This land area was home to the five kingdoms of Tambapanni, Upatissa, Anuradhapura, Sigiriya, and Polonnaruwa. The NCP was established as a separate administrative unit in 1873 by the British administration (Wimalaratana 2000). The lines of demarcation drawn by the British rule did not essentially coincide with their native counterparts. As a result, certain historical areas such as Sigiriya and Tambapanni are not parts of the current NCP even though they belonged to Rajarata under the native divisions.

The NCP consisting of 10714 km² land area is the largest province of the country covering 16.31 percent of the entire land area of the island. The province consists of two administrative districts as Anuradhapura (7128 km²) and Polonnaruwa (3403 km²) and 29 DS divisions, 989 GN divisions, 3742 villages, and 02 Municipal Councils as Anuradhapura Municipality and recently demarcated Polonnaruwa Municipality (Wimalaratana 2000). The two districts and two Municipal Councils have been named after the two olden major kingdoms of the province. The two Municipal Councils are considered as capitals of each district. The ruins and historical attractions of the two olden kingdoms are mostly concentrated in and around these municipalities.

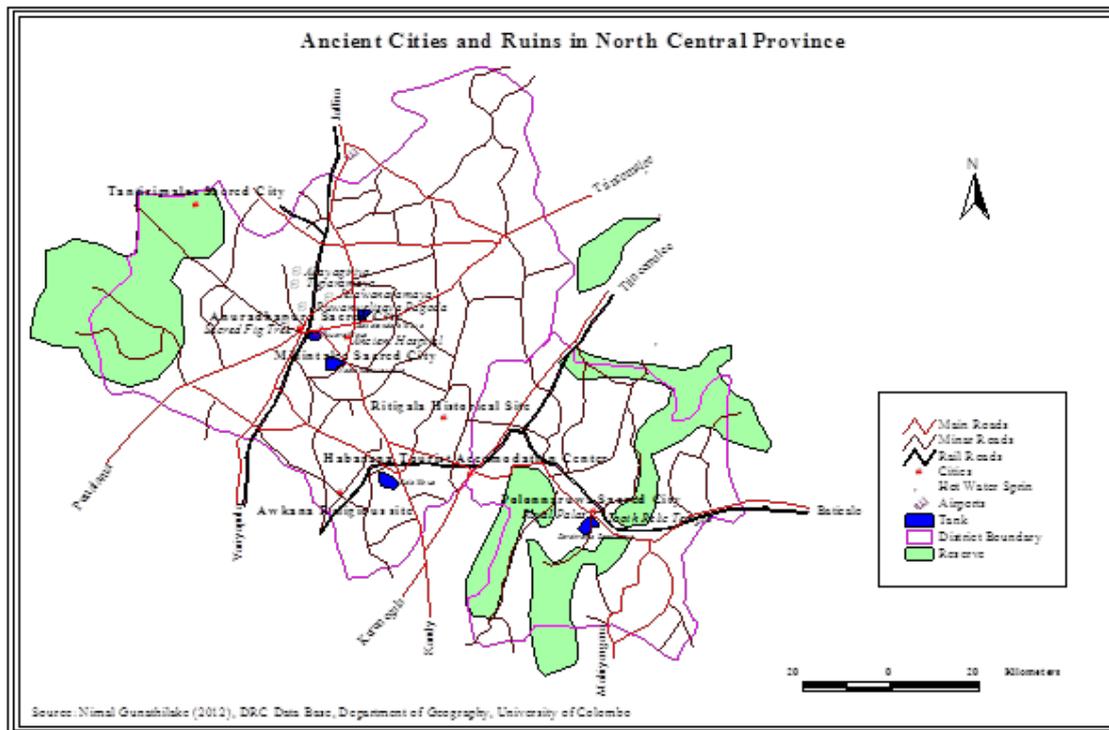
Anuradhapura Kingdom (4C BC-11C AD):

The beginning of the ancient city of Anuradhapura first as a simple village and thereafter a fully fledged city goes back to the arrival of king Vijayain 6th century BC. One of his ministers by the name of Anuradha built a village close to the banks of the Malwathu River and it was named as Anuradha village during that period. King Pandukabhaya (437-367 BC) made this prosperous village his capital and turned it into a sophisticated city with necessary facilities.

“The city [Anuradhapura] is one of the principal shrines of Buddhism. The cutting from the fig tree of Buddha, brought there in the 3rd century BC, has flourished and, today, the Bodhi tree spreads out over the centre of the site from a sanctuary near the Brazen Palace” (UNESCO n.d.)

The city served as the capital of Sri Lanka for nearly 1400 years and more than 120 kings ruled the island from this city using it as the center of administration. Consequent to a South Indian invasion during 1017 AD, it ceased to be the capital of the island. Sri Lanka was ruled by nearly 196 monarchs

map 1:



beginning with the first native capital of Anuradhapura to the last native kingdom of Kandy before the entire island was brought under British rule in 1815. Well over a half of those kings ruled the country from the kingdom of Anuradhapura. The modern Anuradhapura district consists of 22 DS divisions and 694 GN divisions (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). It is located some 225 km away from Colombo city.

Polonaruwa Kingdom (11C AD-13C AD):

This city was developed as the garrison town of the island during the Anuradhapura period itself. It became the second capital of Sri Lanka after a South Indian Chola king chose it as his center of administration following the fall of Anuradhapura in 1017AD. The Chola king kept the reign of the kingdom while promoting of the worship of Hindu gods until it was re-captured by a Sri Lankan king in 1070. The Sinhalese civilization shifted from Polonaruwa to Dambadeniya in 1232 AD after another South Indian invasion and it never came back to NCP thereafter.

The modern Polonnaruwa district consists of 07 DS divisions and 295 GN divisions (Department of Census and Statistics 2012). It is located some 216 km away from Colombo city.

CLIMATIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS IN THE NCP

Climatic condition in the North Central Province is generally dry and warm although there are some variations during different seasons. Average annual rainy days and annual rainfall during 2007-2011 period have been 99 and 485 millimeters respectively (Central Bank of Sri Lanka 2011). The overwhelming majority of rainy days have occurred between October and January of the year. The green environment with hundreds and thousands of irrigation tanks filled with water, aquatic plants and flowers such as lotus and water lily are a fascinating common scene during this rainy season. Both rain fed and irrigated agriculture practices are carried out in the province. It is the great cultivation season in the province as well as

of the entire island. The temperature is low through December to February.

The period between November to March is the main tourist arrival season of the island and it coincides with the winter season in the northern hemisphere and perhaps the period with the best climatic condition for tourists in the island. The average temperature in the island including the NCP is low during this period. December to the middle of February could be considered as the mild winter season of the island. The environmental comfort for the tourist comes naturally during

this period even though it is somewhat rainy in the NCP during this season.

The overwhelming majority of the population in the NCP belongs to the Sinhalese community and Buddhist religion. The second largest ethno-religious community in the province is Moslem while the Tamil community and Hindu religion account for only a very small percentage when compared to the national figures. Sinhalese Buddhist culture dominates in the province reflecting the historical background, so that the religious and cultural tourism in the province is largely

Table 3: Climatic Conditions in the NCP

Climatic factor	Jan.	Feb.	Mar.	April	May	June	July	Aug.	Sep.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.
Average Monthly Rainfall (mm)	201.8	96.3	36.7	113.7	65.8	21.2	39.6	77.7	77.4	216.1	382.4	323.9
Average Monthly Temperature oC	25.1	25.8	27.2	28.6	29.0	28.7	28.7	28.0	27.9	27.3	26.1	25.1

Source: Nimal Gunatilake, DRC Database, University of Colombo 2014.

Sinhala-Buddhist oriented in nature.

RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL TOURISM POTENTIAL OF THE NCP

People travel to distant places from their place of residence to satisfy the natural curiosity of unknown behavioral patterns of unfamiliar people, their living environment, food and beverages, beliefs, rituals, historical heritage, paintings, music, dance and scholarly pursuits. 'There is perhaps no phenomenon as complex as culture. ... culture is everything in a particular society, ... But culture is not only a matter of music, dance, art, and cinema; from marriage customs, death rites, patterns of pilgrimage to holy cities, modes of raising children, treatment of elders, and innumerable other aspects of everyday life

are stitched into the meaning of culture' (Lal Vinay 2012).

Sri Lanka has a name and fame for tourism destination since antiquity mainly due to its strategic location, religious, cultural and natural attractions, spices and valuable stones. It is customary to consider Ceylon's history as commencing from 544 BC on the basis that prince Vijaya, the exiled son of a royal Aryan family in Bengal, north-east India, made a quite unexpected, but important, arrival on the island (Brohier1982). Apostle Mahinda, son of emperor Asoka of India, arrived at Mihintale from North Central Sri Lanka with a group of devotees in 3rd century BC to propagate Buddhism. Sanghamitta nun, the sister of Apostle Mahinda, came to Anuradhapura together with a few other nuns to start a fully

Table 4: Percentage of Population in the NCP Ethnicity and Religion-2001

	Location	Ethnicity				
		Sinhalese	Tamil	Sri Lankan Moor	Other	
1.	Anuradhapura District	91.0	00.6	8.2	0.2	
2.	Polonnaruwa District	90.7	01.8	7.4	0.1	
3.	Sri Lanka	74.9	15.3	9.3	0.5	
	Location	Religion				
		Buddhist	Hindu	Islam	Christian	Other
1.	Anuradhapura District	90.1	00.4	8.3	--	1.2
2.	Polonnaruwa District	89.7	01.7	7.5	--	1.1
3.	Sri Lanka	70.1	12.6	9.7	6.2	1.4

Source: Department of Census and Statistics, Census of Population and Housing, 2011

ordained female Buddhist monastic order. She brought the southern branch of the fig tree at which Siddhartha Gautama (Buddha) attained spiritual enlightenment, and planted it in Anuradhapura. The tooth relic of Buddha, now kept in the Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic in Kandy, was brought by prince Dantha

and Princes Hemamala of India in the 4th century AD, again to Anuradhapura (Geiger 1950). The period that began thus laid the foundation for a great civilization whose remains add to the cultural potential of NCP today.

Table 5: Religious and cultural tourism potential of the NCP

	Potential	Description
1.	Pilgrimages to olden religious sites	Anuradhapura, Mihintale, Tanthirimale, Awukana, Polonnaruwa, Ritigala and many other ancient locations in the province are extremely useful for this purpose. In addition to that there are many newly built religious attractions in the province. Followers of Buddhism can go on pilgrimages to those locations for their spiritual and moral development/awakening. They can even participate in certain religious practices along with the local devotees.
2.	Visiting historical sites and Museums	The remains of religious, economic, social, political and military history of olden Sri Lanka have been preserved to a great extent in many historical places in the province. The inquisitive visitor can explore and learn many previously unknown facts and figures from historical sites. Qualified and well informed tourist guides, site booklets etc. would be useful in this endeavor.

	Potential	Description
		There are a number of museums in NCP historical sites to acquire a good knowledge of those locations as well as related stories. Ex: Archeological Museum, Isurumuniya Museum and Folk Museum in Anuradhapura, Tanthirimale Museum, Mihintale Museum and Veheragala Museum.
3.	Observing religious practices	<p>To make an attempt to understand the dominant nature of the local life, one can observe Buddhist religious practices for a short period of time.</p> <p>Popular Buddhist meditation practices can be followed while visiting historical sites to develop mindfulness and to improve concentration. There are a number of organizations to help this purpose. Meditation cum Yoga practices is also available from certain service providers.</p>
4.	Festivals	<p>Religious festivals: The month of June (Poson) is a special period of festivals, ceremonies, and celebration in Anuradhapura and Mihintale. In and around the full moon day of the month tens of thousands of devotees flock together to these sites to commemorate the introduction of Buddhism and new culture to the island by apostle Mahinda from India.</p> <p>There are some other religious festivals and processions in the province linked with Buddhist monasteries or temples devoted to deities on other days.</p> <p>The new year festival celebrated in the middle of April is an important event in the island. It features a number of religious observations, rituals as well as indigenous sports, dances, and folk songs. People clad in indigenous costumes prepare traditional dishes and sweets in almost every Sinhala Buddhist house during the new year season.</p>
5.	Ceremonies and rituals	<p>There are many ceremonies and rituals in the province. One of them is the offering of new rice to the sacred fig tree in Anuradhapura. The best part of the rice reaped in the great cultivation season (Maha season) is offered to the sacred fig tree in April by farmers in the province under the guidance of Buddhist priests. Farmers bring newly harvested rice in small bowls and fill a large bowl kept close to the sacred fig tree until it overflows.</p> <p>Ceremonies involved with rain retreat (Vas) of Buddhist priests are performed in almost every temple in every village of the province between the full moon day of July and the full moon day of October. Rain Retreat is followed by Kathina, a festival in which laity express its gratitude to priests by offering robes and other essential items to monasteries.</p>

	Potential	Description
		<p>In addition to Buddhist monasteries, there are many temples dedicated to gods, goddesses, and deities throughout the province. Annual/ periodical ceremonies are conducted in temples dedicated to those powerful beings are a part and parcel of the NCP culture. They are thought to be invisible powerful beings who had acquired huge merit through donation, observing precepts, and meditation in the previous life. There had been occasions in olden days in which some human beings with special virtues, especially those who were extra ordinarily committed to the wellbeing of the people, were raised to the level of deities after their deaths and were worshiped. The origin of the majority of those powerful beings could be traced to India. Among many others, a few old monarchs are also worshiped in this manner.</p> <p>Every important event of life, mostly in rural areas, from birth through first alphabet reading, female puberty, marriage, funeral and death anniversaries are marked by religious or worldly ceremonies.</p>
6.	Religious cum adventure tourism	The isolated Ritigala mountain range is an ideal location for mountaineering expeditions cum cultural/religious tourism.
7.	Study the doctrine, culture, arts, history and archeology.	<p>The province is full of olden and modern Buddhist art, architecture and craft such as olden and new Stupas (pagodas), image houses, sculptures, stone staircases, olden roads, byroads, ponds, paintings, fortresses, ruins, and waterways for studies and research work related to religion and culture etc.</p> <p>There are two universities by the names of Buddhasravaka Dharmapeetha and Rajarata University in Anuradhapura / Mihintale. The former is a dedicated institute for Buddhist studies. There is a Buddhist monastery in almost every neighborhood in the province with educated priests. Accommodation facilities of local standard are available in a number of such monasteries. Tourists can learn about Buddhism and the culture that it has given life to throughout thousands of years.</p>
8.	Agro cum cultural tourism	The main livelihood of the overwhelming majority of people living in the province is agriculture, mainly cultivation. Agricultural practices are still surrounded by some cultural/ ritual practices. Great season harvesting period (February-April) would be ideal to observe such practices.
9.	Religion cum indigenous medicine	Indigenous medicinal (Ayurvedic) practice is closely associated with Buddhism in the province. Physical and mental illnesses are treated simultaneously and effectively. There are a number of famous and reliable indigenous medical practitioners in the province who can orient tourists to this tradition.

	Potential	Description
10.	Authentic foods	The province is famous for its own authentic recipes of dishes, confection, and staple diets. However, certain food items are seasonal. Water lily rice (tank rice), finger millet (kurakkan) based foods, food based on traditional tubers and vegetables, special varieties of sweets, etc. are available in the province.
11.	Visiting countryside (villages)	Traditional settlements in the province feature irrigation tanks, their canal systems, paddy fields, homestead and gardens, Buddhist temples, veneration place for deities located close to the tank, tracks of forest land, shrub areas for shifting cultivation, and gravel roads linking villages and motorways. The traditional cultural and religious heritage is preserved in some villages to a great extent, and can be observed by tourists.
12.	UNESCO - Sri Lanka Cultural triangle trip	A triangular area formed by connecting historical sites of Anuradpura, Polonnaruwa and Kandy is referred to as the cultural triangle of Sri Lanka. The area is covered by a number of historical sites including the famous Sigiriya fortress, Dambulla rock temple, Mihintale, Ritigala, Awukana, etc. in addition to the three previously mentioned main historical cities. Special convenient packages are offered to tourists by private tour operators. Different types of tourist accommodations are easily available in the province.

HISTORICAL LOCATIONS IN THE NCP: THE HIGHEST POTENTIAL FOR CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS TOURISM

Anuradhapura (UNESCO World Heritage City):

Anuradhapura, a sacred Buddhist religious destination, was the capital of ancient Sri Lanka from 4th century BC to 11 century AD. The city area spreads over 40 square kilometers. Buddhism was introduced to the island in 236 BC by Emperor Asoka of India while King Devanampiyatissa kept this city as the capital of his kingdom. It is located some 250 km away from Colombo in the North Central Province. The city has a name and fame for one of the most extensive ruin concentrations in the world.

Most of the irrigation tanks of the island were constructed in the days of the ancient kings of Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa ‘... when stone-hewing seems to have been as common an employment as making earthen cooking utensils is now. The whole land is strewn with blocks of carved and hewn stone, and the sluices of the tanks were made of the same durable material, and remain to this day.’ (Administration Report 1870) (See Table 6).

Mihintale (Mahinda’s Hill):

Mihintale, currently a fairly large village with some urban facilities, is situated in the North Central Province of the island, about 221 km from Colombo and just 12 km east of the UNESCO World Heritage city of Anuradhapura. It is also another popular

Table 6: Selected religious attractions and ruins in Anuradhapura city

	Location	Description
1.	Sacred Fig Tree	The sacred Bo (fig) tree in Bodh Gaya of the current State of Bihar, India under which Siddhartha Gautama (563 BC- 483 BC) attained enlightenment (Buddha hood). The southern branch of the same tree was brought to Sri Lanka in 249 BC and was planted in Anuradhapura. It is the oldest recorded human planted living tree in the world now.
2.	ThuparamaPagoda	The first stupa (Pagoda) built in Sri Lanka in the 3 rd century BC immediately after receiving Buddhism by king DevanampiyaTissa, even though some records maintain that Mahiyangana and Tiriyayastupas were built during the lifetime of Buddha.
3.	RuvanveliPagoda	One of the tallest stupas (Pagoda) in the world standing at 91.4 meters and with a circumference of 290 meters built by king Dutthagamini (161 BC- 137 BC).
4.	JetavanaPagoda	The tallest brick-built stupa (Pagoda) in the world. The paved platform on which it stands covers more than 8 acres (3 hectares) of land. The height of the stupa is 121.9 meters, the tallest in Sri Lanka and the olden world. This was constructed by king Mahasena (273-301 AD) and his son Maghavanna.
5.	Abhayagiri monastery and Pagoda	The monastery and the Stupa (pagoda) were built by king Valagambahu (89-77 BC). The monastery was a center of intellectuals of many branches in Buddhism except the Thervada School. FaHien, a 5 th century Chinese monk lived here two years. There were some 5000 monks living in this instate during that period of time.
6.	FaHien and Abhayagiri Museum	FaHien (Faxian), a famous Chinese Buddhist priest, visited Anuradhapura around 410 AD in search of Buddhist scriptures. He lived there nearly two years, mostly in Abhayagiri temple of Anuradapura city during the reign of king Mahanama. FaHien left China in 399 AD at the age of 65 years. After spending nearly 14 years on the trip he came to China in 413 AD at the age of 79 years. On his return, he translated scriptures into the Chinese language with the help of Buddhabhandra, an Indian Buddhist priest. FaHien seems to have visited many religiously important locations in the island and also lived in different parts of the country during his stay. Fahiyangala (FaHien's cave) located in the Kalutara district of the western province of the country is considered one of them. The priest seems to have lived here for sometime on his pilgrimage to the Sri Paada (Adam's Peak), and the place was later named after him.

	Location	Description
7.	Twin Ponds	Two ponds that were built by king Aggabodhi during 575-608 AD used by Buddhist priests for bathing purposes. Two ponds are connected through a pipeline at the bottom. The necessary water for the ponds is supplied through an underground pipeline after passing through several filtering chambers. Water first entered the larger pond (40.6m X15.6m) through a mouth of a dragon then went to the smaller pond (28m X 15.6m).
8.	Isurumuni Lovers	Isurumuniya rock temple built by king DevanamPiyatissa is famous for its rock carving of two lovers. It is maintained that the carving depicts prince Saliya, son of king Duttagamini, and his low caste fiancée Asokamala. The prince gave up the throne because of his lover.
9.	Brazen Palace	This nine storied palace was built by king Duttagamini for Buddhist monks. It is also known as Lovamahapaya or Lohaprasadaya in Sinhala language as the roof of the building was covered by bronze tiles. Historical records suggest that this building boasted a height of 47 meters and length and width of 46 meters on each side. The building was originally supported by 1600 stone pillars.
10.	Other Important Places	Mirisawetiastupa, seated Buddha statue, elephant pond, folk museum, archeological museum, royal palaces, inscriptions and other ruins scattered throughout the province.

destination of Sri Lankan Buddhists as well as in bound tourists to the island. The site is also called Missaka Pabbata, Cetiya giri or Sagiri.

Mihintale is a mountain range consisting of three main hills- Ambastala (plateau of the Mango), Rajagiri (mountain of the king) and Anaikutti (Mountain of the elephant). In the 3rd century BC Buddhism was first introduced to Sri Lanka at the site of Mihintale by apostle Mahinda, son of Emperor Asoka of India, and was first embraced by king Devanampiyatissa (307-266 BC) of Sri Lanka. This was followed by mass conversions to Buddhism by the people of the country. Buddhist devotees in large numbers gather to Anuradhapura and Mihintale on the full moon day of June every year to celebrate the introduction of Buddhism to Sri Lanka (See table 7).

Polonnaruwa

This is the second largest ancient city next to Anuradhapura located in the North Central

Province some 221 km from Colombo. It is also the second capital of Sri Lanka after the destruction of Anuradhapura in 993 by invaders. (See table 8)

Ritigala (Arittha Pabbata)

Ritigala, the highest isolated mountain range in Sri Lanka consisting of four peaks in the vast northern dry plain of the island, lies just 43 km away from the historical city of Anuradhapura. The highest point of the mountain range is 766m above sea level and 600m above the surrounding plains and nearly 4.8km long. It spreads over 1582 hectares (3776 acres) and is a highly protected nature reserve with distinctive biodiversity. This rare location is an excellent destination for both culture and eco-tourism. Upper parts of the mountains are covered with clouds and mist during rainy season (October to January) and from evening to morning even in many dry days. The temperature is less and the moisture is

Table 7: Selected religious attractions and ruins in Mihintale

	Religious attraction/ ruin	Description
1.	Ancient Hospital	The ruins of an ancient hospital built by king Sena II (866-901 AD) are visible at the foot of the mountain. A dug rock cavity in the shape of a human that was used for immersing patients in medicinal bath, circular stones used for grinding medicinal herbs, and the ground plan of the hospital are visible among some others in the location. FaHien's records suggest that there was a hospital in this location while he was in Sri Lanka during the 5th century AD (see above).
2.	Stone stair way to the mountain	1840 elegantly carved and paved granite rock steps take the visitor from bottom to the top of the mountain. All steps are shaded by frangipani trees.
3.	Kantaka Chetiya	Kantaka Chetiya, a stupa built by king Suratissa in the 1 st century BC is visible halfway through to the mountain on the right side. It is 40 feet in height and 425 feet in circumference. The stupa is famous in Sri Lanka due to its special architectural features.
4.	Mango tree stupa	Ambasthala (mango tree) stupawas built over the ashes of Arahata Mahinda who surprised king Devanampiyatissa on that spot and quizzed him to test his intelligence before preaching him. It is located on the plain close to the summit of the rock.
5.	Aradhanagala (Rock of convocation)	The top of the mountain where sage Mahinda stood with his disciples and called out to king Devanampiyatissa who was chasing a deer.
6.	Rock caves	There are over 60 rock caves that were used by Buddhist monks in ancient times. Evidence suggests that one of them was used by sage Mahinda.
7.	Other historical monuments	Ruins of monasteries, stone inscriptions, ruins of water pools, sculptures, ruins of refectory, lion fountain, sage Mahinda's bed, ponds, meditation seats, relic houses, assembly halls, pavilions and a museum.

higher in the upper parts of the mountains in contrast to the surrounding dry plains of the bottom. The mountains are home to lush vegetation and a multitude of species.

The ruins of a monastery built during the 1st century BC scattered over an area of 24 hectares (59 acres) are visible in the location. There are some 70 odd caves used by meditating monks during the 1st century

BC and early centuries of AD. Among others, olden paths with pavements, inscriptions, decorated urinals consisting of urine cups, drain holes and foot supports, and broken man made reservoirs to store water for the drinking and bathing needs of meditating monks can be observed here.

The Ramayana, an Indian epic compiled during the 4th century BC, refers to the island

Table 8: Selected religious attractions and ruins in Polonnaruwa

	Religious attraction/ ruin	Description
1.	The Royal Palace	Ruins of a five story building with signs of all facilities to meet the needs of an incumbent monarch. Ruins and historical records suggest that the building consisted of separate chambers for the queen, bathing places, official quarters, dining rooms with kitchens, and parks. The compound was surrounded by a wide rampart with watch towers, turrets, and walks. The complex was built by king Parkramabahu the first in the 12 th century.
2.	The Seven Storied Building	Sathmahal Prasada (seven storied building) with a staircase to reach the upper levels is an unusual pyramid shape stupa to Sri Lanka although commonly visible in Thailand and Cambodia. It was made out of brick and is over 9 meters in height. It is maintained that this was built to use as the worship place of Cambodian soldiers who worked under the king.
3.	Tooth Relic Temple	Atadage (house of eight relics), the first tooth relic temple of the kingdom, was built by king Vijayabahu in the 11th century. Nearly 54 stone pillars of the building with inscriptions in Sinhala and Tamil are visible today. A big Buddha statue – 3 meters high – is also visible near the end of the temple.
4.	Stone Shrine	Gal Viharaya (stone shrine) is one of the most admired and venerated places in the country consisting of stone statues of Buddha in all major postures- standing, seated, and recumbent.
5.	Monastic Educational Complex	Alahana Pirivena (monastic educational institute) founded by king Parakramabahu the first in the 12 th century AD reflects the level of education of the Buddhist order in the kingdom. Recent excavations suggest that the complex consisted of a special hospital for monks in addition to providing educational facilities.
6.	Pagoda with a Golden Pinnacle	Rankoth Vehera (Pagoda with a golden pinnacle) with stone paving and gateways constructed by king Nissankamalla.
7.	Hindu Shrines and Monuments	About 14 Hindu shrines in the ancient city testify to the South Indian influence prevalent in the kingdom. The Shiva shrine and the sculpture of God Shiva and Partvati standing together are noticeable attractions among these.
8.	Other Monuments	Latha Mandapa (flower scroll halls), council chamber, statue of sage, sacred quadrangle, image houses, pagodas, pavilions, library, 9 meters long stone slab, etc.

as Lanka, the fortress of a powerful demon king Ravana who captured the wife of Rama, an incarnation of the Hindu God Vishnu. The epic says further that Hanuman, a mighty monkey deity, leapt over to Lanka and destroyed its capital by fire and leapt back to India from the Ritigala Mountain to inform Rama that his wife Sita had been found in Sri Lanka.

Ritigala is strategically located between Anuradhapura and lies in close proximity to four major tourist attractions namely Polonnaruwa, Sigiriya, Dambulla and Habarana.

Tanthirimale

Tanthirimale, an important Buddhist religious place in the province, is located some 40 km away from the holy city of Anuradhapura. Folklore suggests that prince Saliya, the exiled son of king Duttagamini, married to a low caste girl called Ashokamala, lived in this village for years before being forgiven (see above Isuruminya lovers). The king gifted them with a golden necklace resembling a local butterfly called 'Thanthiri'. The necklace is called Male in Sinhalese language and the place name 'Tanthirimale' was coined after joining the two words -Tanthiri and Male-together. It is said that in the past this location was also called as ThivakkaBamunugama (the village of Thivakka Brahmin) as it was under his control.

The location is believed to have been used as a resting place by the procession lead by the Buddhist nun Sanggamitta, daughter of Emperor Asoka, while she was headed to Anuradhapura city with a sampling of Sri Mahabo tree after landing at Dambakola Patuana (Dambakola Port).

The sacred location spreads over 300 acres and it consists of the following religiously important objects.

i. Sacred Bo tree flourishing on the rock space.

This tree is believed to be one of the eight sacred Bo samplings received from the Bo tree of Bodh Gaya of India. As a mark of appreciation for providing accommodation on their way to Anuradhapura, an offshoot of the Bo sampling was planted here by the procession lead by nun Sangamitta.

ii. Ancient Buddha statues - 15 meter long reclining statue and 2.16 meter high seated statue.

In addition to those two sacred places olden buildings, caves with pre historic paintings, incomplete granite carvings and many historical ruins are visible in this location.

Awukana Buddha Statue

This 5th century 12m high standing Buddha statue has been carved out of a large granite face, and is located in Kekirawa village in Anuradhapura city. This 'blessing posture' statute is not completely separated from the granite and a narrow strip is left at the back of the statue to support it. The 1 m high pedestal on which the statue stands is carved out in the form of a double petal lotus flower. The total height of the statue with its lotus pedestal is 13 meters. The robe of the statue is worn tightly outlining the shape of the body. It is maintained that the statue reflects the influence of Indian Gandhara and Amaravathi schools of art.

STRATEGY FOR TAPPING THE CULTURAL POTENTIAL OF THE NCP

Some of these cultural resources – such as the ruins in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa – even now attract a considerable number of tourists to the NCP. Some others, however, are scarcely discussed, and hence remain obscured from the popular tours. If these resources are also duly utilized, the potential of the NCP as a tourist hub would greatly increase, thereby yielding considerable profits to the national economy.

Better socio-economic conditions, a tourist friendly community, fairly developed infrastructural facilities and quality are instrumental in promoting tourism. Dedicated and well equipped service providers with excellent past track records are also an added advantage in this endeavor.

The historical and cultural heritage should essentially be preserved in their pristine form while ensuring a pleasurable and an entertaining stay for the tourist. A concerted

effort with the participation of the priesthood, community, public officials, and service providers is necessary in this effort.

A certain percentage of benefits of the industry should go to the community and certain target products can be introduced for this purpose. This would also incentivize the local community to galvanize its efforts towards energizing the local tourism industry.

Finally, even though Buddhism and the Sinhalese culture are dominant in the province,

Table 9: Potential countries to promote the NCP as a religious destination

China	Taiwan
India	Nepal
Japan	Cambodia
Thailand	Myanmar
Vietnam	Bhutan
Myanmar	Mongolia
South Korea	Laos
Singapore	USA

other religions and cultures are practiced freely side by side. It is possible and desirable to organize multi-cultural events in order to develop feelings of collective ownership and responsibility of tourism products among all communities.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka is a tropical island with exceptional biodiversity, beautiful wide beaches fringed with coconut groves, rich cultural heritage, multi-religious and multi-ethnic society, friendly people with smiling faces, mouth-watering spicy foods, succulent tropical fruits and many varieties of vegetables. Although the island carries a small population, it is rich in four major religions and cultural diversity that offers immense attraction to the tourist. Buddhism is the main religion of the overwhelming majority of the people, while Hinduism, Christianity and Islam are also practiced by portions of the population.

The resultant rich cultural heritage of the island has been constructed around religious practices, historical monuments and ancient cities, meditation, yoga, folk music and dances, festivities, ceremonies and rituals.

The North Central Province of Sri Lanka is especially rich in religious and cultural resources owing largely to it housing two cities that served as the island's capital for more than 1000 years in ancient times. However, only a small fraction of this vast amount of resources has been utilized by the tourism industry so far. The paper has argued that the promotion of religious and cultural tourism products in the North Central Province of Sri Lanka will open up new avenues of engagement for tourists and income generation for the island.

Towards this end, suggestions have been made for better socio-economic conditions, a tourist friendly community, fairly developed infrastructural facilities and quality as the

foundation to promote tourism in the province. Additionally, dedicated and well equipped service providers with excellent past track records are also an added advantage in this endeavor.

The paper has observed that while some places and activities are already included in the mainstream tourist package, some others such as Ritigala, Tantirimale (places), and visiting villages (activities) have yet to be introduced to it. Similarly, new tourism products such as culture cum adventure and culture cum agro tourism can be promoted in the province.

Community participation will be decisive in the success of any effort towards galvanizing the local tourist industry in the NCP. Hence it would be advisable to launch a concerted effort with the participation of the priesthood, community, public officials, and service providers when preserving the historical and cultural heritage of the area. Additionally, ensuring that a certain percentage of benefits of the industry go to the community by way of introducing certain target products will incentivize the local community to galvanize its efforts towards energizing the local tourism industry.

Finally, notwithstanding the dominant Sinhala-Buddhist culture in the area, the prevalence of a multi-religious, multi-cultural social fabric needs to be acknowledged and celebrated. This would be in the interests of the local tourist industry also, since it would on the one hand attract tourists to witness life unfolding in a multitude of ways, and on the other help develop feelings of collective ownership and responsibility of tourism products among all communities.

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