

THE HISTORY OF CEYLON (*circa* 1500-1658)

A historiographical and bibliographical survey

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Paul E. Pieris in the introduction to his *Ceylon: the Portuguese Era* Vol. I published in 1913 stated that the period 1505-1658 in the history of the island may be "conveniently, if somewhat inaccurately, termed the Portuguese era". In a book published two decades later, *A History of Ceylon for Schools, 1505-1911* (item 283) Fr. S. G. Perera was much less cautious, and he divided the more recent history of the island into three periods, of which the first was the *Portuguese period, 1505-1658*. Fr. Perera's work, as well as another book by David Hussey entitled *Ceylon and World History*, (Colombo, 1932), also tended to foster the related concept that 1505 also marked the beginning of modern Ceylon, thus establishing a modern period of Ceylon history which happily coincided with that of Western Europe.

These ideas were, however, by no means unchallenged. Ananda K. Coomaraswamy writing in 1908 on Sinhalese arts and crafts in the eighteenth century had entitled his book *Medieval Sinhalese Art*. H. W. Codrington in his work, *A Short History of Ceylon* (London, 1926) placed little emphasis on 1505 as the crucial date, although a decade later he thought of the medieval Sinhalese kingdom ending in the early sixteenth century (*JCBRAS*, Vol. VII, New Series 1960, pp. 93-103). Indeed 1505 has always been a rather doubtful starting point for even the evidence that the Portuguese arrived in Ceylon in that year has never been conclusive (See item 223).

A different view point was also advanced by G. C. Mendis who maintained that the modernisation of Ceylon originated only "with the British occupation of the Maritime Provinces" in 1796. (G. C. Mendis, *Ceylon under the British*, Colombo, 1944, p. ix). Nevertheless, the immense popularity of Fr. S. G. Perera's work ensured his ideas wider currency than those of his opponents. His book was reprinted seven times between 1932 and 1955. A Sinhalese translation, first published in 1948, was reprinted thrice by 1963. His views received added impetus by being embodied in an extremely readable school text written by Horace Perera entitled *Ceylon under Western Rule*, (Colombo, 1954).

A frontal attack on these ideas was first delivered by K. W. Goonewardena. In a series of lectures on Ceylon history delivered at the University of Ceylon,

Peradeniya between 1954 and 1969, he argued that the demarcation of periods in the recent history of the island "on the basis of the European power controlling the island or a part of it" though perhaps convenient for various reasons could give "a false idea of the shaping of history during these periods". He argued that "for instance, though their connection with Ceylon began in 1505, the Portuguese did not exercise political authority until from about 1592. Even then the area they controlled was limited and their hold tenuous. In the day-to-day administration, in economic, social, cultural and religious matters, what was indigenous was far more important than what was Portuguese during this period". The above extracts are derived from an article by him entitled *Ceylon in The Historiography of the British Empire-Commonwealth*, edited by Robin W. Winks, (Durham, North Carolina, 1966) but much the same views had been expressed by him a decade before this. Though Gooneratne might possibly have overstated his case, his argument is certainly valid. So indeed was his salutary warning on the "type of periodisation which stems from the experience of European history". These views however have as yet had rather limited currency. Recent secondary school texts in Sinhalese show little trace of them. More significant, *The University History of Ceylon*, Volume I, Parts I and II, published in 1959-1960 were so designed as to end with "the arrival of the Portuguese in 1505".

Mere alteration of terminal dates of periods of history is generally of little practical value. Nevertheless, for a Ceylonese student interested primarily in the historical evolution of the island, a study of history based on indigenous politico-cultural units such as the Kotte period *circa* 1410-1597, the Kandyan period 1593-1815 and perhaps an intervening Sitawaka period 1521-1593 might be more meaningful than those based on the nationality of the Europeans present in the coastlands. It might also help to avoid the tendency to view Ceylon history from the decks of visiting European ships.

On the other hand the period *circa* 1500-1658 may be usefully retained in any study of the western impact on Ceylon. Due to the nature of extant literature it is also useful for bibliographical and historiographical surveys. For the first time in the history of the island foreign sources became more useful than local ones in the study of the history of the country.

The first group of historians who dealt with this period of Ceylon history were of course the chroniclers of the Portuguese Eastern Empire—Gaspar Correa, Lopez de Castanheda, Joao de Barros, Diogo do Couto, Antonio Bocarro and Manoel Faria de Souza. These form a motley crowd—differing in style, accuracy and attitudes. Only one of them is known to have visited Ceylon. Two never came to the east at all. Couto went to some length to check his information 'consorting with Sinhalese princes, Moghul ambassadors, Ethiopian Jesuits, learned Brahmins and Banyans'. (*The Tragic History of the Sea, 1589-1622*, edited by C. R. Boxer, Cambridge, 1959, p. 35). On the other hand Bocarro writing his *Decada XIII* in Goa in the 1630's did not check

on the clauses of the treaty of 1617 between the Portuguese and the king of Kandy although a copy was available in the archives of which he was the keeper. Yet, they had one obvious characteristic in common. They were all concerned primarily, indeed almost wholly with the activities of the Portuguese whether in Ceylon or elsewhere. There were exceptions. Couto for instance provided a summarised and rather garbled version of the *Rajavaliya*, one of the Sinhalese chronicles. But generally aspects of Ceylon's literature, life and customs, economy and even those political developments which did not directly affect the Portuguese were regrettably, if understandably omitted. Further information on these Portuguese historians can be obtained from C. R. Boxer, 'Three Portuguese historians' in the *Boletim de Instituto Portugues de Hongkong Macao*, 1948 and articles by J. B. Harrison and I. A. MacGregor in *Historical Writings on the Peoples of Asia*. London, 1960.

The work of Fr. Fernao de Queyroz also composed in the seventeenth century was somewhat unlike the previously mentioned works being a study centred on Ceylon. Queyroz's book still remains the best single source for the period 1500-1658, although it is open to some of the criticism that is levelled against the other Portuguese writers. In fact, his ability to write a book of over 1000 pages on the temporal and spiritual conquest of Ceylon with so few references to Buddhism and Hinduism would have seemed amazing even considering the author's background, had not there been textbooks published as late as the 1960's on the same period of history with much the same attitude. Due to the specialized nature of his work, however, the scattered references to social and economic conditions found in the *Conquista* are of greater use than those in works of other contemporary Portuguese writers save perhaps Joao Ribeiro's.

Ribeiro's work is more a descriptive essay than a historical account and embodies the Portuguese common soldier's view of Ceylon. Fortunately for us, Ribeiro proved to be interested in the way of life of the people of south-west Ceylon with whom he lived for eighteen years. His work, together with that of Robert Knox, the English captive who lived in Kandyan territory between 1660-1679, re-inforced by Sinhalese sources help us to form some idea of life in seventeenth century Ceylon. Ribeiro, however, was even more prone than other Portuguese writers to exaggerate the role played by the Portuguese especially in battle fields. He, like his countrymen, often exaggerated the number of their opponents to almost unbelievable proportions, while *mestico*, Sinhalese, Indian and African auxiliaries who fought for the Portuguese were, as often as not, conveniently forgotten. On the whole, however, the Portuguese writers, if often prejudiced and unable to appreciate the opposite point of view, proved ready critics of their countrymen in refreshing contrast to many contemporary chroniclers of more modern colonial empires.

The Dutch contribution to investigations on the history of Ceylon in the period under survey was somewhat meagre, the most notable effort being that of Baldeaus. Baldeaus, no friend of the Portuguese, though he had an occasional

word of praise for their religious organizations, utilized Sinhalese and Tamil sources for his account. His book, as far as the period up to 1658 was concerned was little improved by Valentyn. In any case the view of Ceylon as a country to be 'civilized and Christianised' persisted until well into the nineteenth century. This is well illustrated by the title of Emerson Tennent's book published in 1850—*Christianity in Ceylon with a historical sketch of the Brahmanical and Buddhist superstitions* (Item 333).

In the late nineteenth century the growth of English education among Ceylonese stimulated investigations into the island's past. English education also brought with it some idea of the growth of critical historical scholarship in the west. Interest in antiquity is well in evidence in the Proceedings of the Ceylon Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society. However, as K. W. Goonewardena aptly remarked, "generally speaking the education which these Sinhalese imbibed and the environment in which they moved led them to look at the past history of the island from the longitude of Greenwich". This was perhaps to be expected from a system of education which placed the knowledge of not only English but even of Latin and Greek above that of the local languages. The tendency was thus to go to the Portuguese and Dutch sources and generally accept their priorities if not their points of view. Yet, these pioneer Ceylonese scholars did indeed render one great lasting service. They translated many of the relevant extracts of the old Portuguese chronicles into English, thus bringing them before a wider public.

Already, however, another stream of historical tradition was merging with the western one. This was composed of the Sinhalese and Tamil versions of the events of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Some of the Tamil traditions were incorporated in the *Yalpana Vaiyava Malai* in the eighteenth century. Other traditions no doubt perished with time. The Sinhalese, however, preserved a greater variety of documents of historical value—lithic inscriptions, *sannasas* or deeds of gifts, *seettu* or records of judicial decisions, *vitti poth* or books of events and *kadaim poth* or books of local history giving local and provincial boundaries (See item 212). Apart from these works and *sandesa* or messenger poems which are useful for topographical information, the Sinhalese writers also composed a number of *hatan kavyas* or war poems and eulogistic poems to present their views on history. To these may be added the two well known chronicles, the *Rajavaliya* and the *Culavamsa*. Of the chronicles the latter is the less useful and presents as partisan an account as those of the Portuguese writers. For instance the *Culavamsa* account of the sixteenth century does not mention either Don Joao Dharmapala, the Portuguese sponsored King of Kotte, 1551-1597, or Don Jeronimo de Azevedo, captain-general of Ceylon 1594-1612. An increasing number of these local sources have been published in the last seven decades and the growing use of such sources is a characteristic of twentieth century scholarship for this period of history.

The two great writers on our period in the early part of the twentieth century were Paulus E. Pieris and Simon G. Perera. They were the first Ceylonese to make use of the Portuguese archives and were jointly responsible for laying the foundations of the social and economic history of the period by the attention they paid to land records. There were, however, significant differences. Pieris, a brilliant Civil Servant denied of the most coveted positions in the administration by the British colonial regime, turned out to be a prolific amateur historian with a strong nationalist bias. His unorthodox use of sources, however, often laid him open for legitimate criticism. Perera, a Ceylonese Jesuit was perhaps less imaginative but was certainly a sounder scholar except when his religious bias coloured his views. K. W. Goonewardena has persuasively interpreted the clash in the attitudes of these two men as a manifestation of a religio-cultural conflict on the historical front (Winks, ed. *op. cit.* 437-447).

By 1950 the efforts of earlier generations of scholars had ensured that a substantial portion of the chronicles relating to this period was published. The outlines of political history were clearly demarcated and a great deal of work had been done on the impact of Christian missions. However, it would probably be fair to say that systematic studies of social and economic conditions of the island had not been made though much information on the aspects had been made available by the publication of several land records.

The efforts during the next two decades were directed at building up a picture of events and peoples in the island by a critical use of primary sources and the filling of gaps left by the earlier historians. In this respect considerable progress was made by the publication of several in-depth studies by members of the Department of History, University of Ceylon, Colombo and Peradeniya. This group of historians although they found the scope of their writing limited by the nature of the source material available generally contributed new perspectives to the history of this period (see items 161, 210, 240 and 350). Meanwhile, the interest in the subject shown by foreign scholars such as C. R. Boxer and G. D. Winius also helped to place events in the island in their global context and the Jesuit historical tradition stretching from Fr. Fernao de Queyroz to Fr. S. G. Perera was ably continued by Fr. W. L. A. Don Peter.

Controversies of earlier days did continue to have echoes. The last salvo of Fr. S. G. Perera on religion was published as late as 1956 and a reply to it by C. R. Boxer, though written almost immediately afterwards did not appear in print till the late 1960's. However, with the defusing of religious controversies in present-day Ceylon which had occurred by the 1960's historians gradually turned to other aspects—perhaps less controversial—but certainly as fascinating.

Most of the historical writing on this period during the present century has concentrated on events in the south-western lowlands. This was primarily due to the relative paucity of source materials for other regions of the island.

However, in a recent publication (L. S. Dewaraja—*A Study of the political, administrative and social structure of the Kandyan Kingdom of Ceylon 1707-1760*, Colombo, 1972) it has been argued that there has been a second and 'deeper' explanation of this phenomenon. As Dewaraja puts it "Until the end of World War II and the beginning of the process of decolonization, western historians were almost all what might be called Europe-centric in their writing. The kind of history they exulted in writing was about the triumphs of the west and the way western penetration had acted as a catalyst to the unchanging east. Ceylonese historians deriving their intellectual nourishment from the west, could not break away from the compulsive urge to examine Ceylon's history in terms of a challenge by the west to indigenous society and institutions. Since Kandy could not be found a place within that framework until the nineteenth century, it was best to leave it alone and concentrate on the more fashionable history that was being written".

There is a glimmer of truth in this change in relation to historical writing in pre-1948 Ceylon though even then there were significant exceptions. However in relation to historical research done since then, Dewaraja's explanation, though fashionable, seems to be based on erroneous assumptions and a superficial examination of data. The works of Goonewardena and Abayasinghe (items 161 and 240) for example are the very opposite of panegyrics on the triumphs of the west. They are attempts to write the history of the island from a local view point in a balanced and fair minded way and in many respects they refute the views of foreign chroniclers and those who uncritically accepted western accounts of events in Ceylon. Data in these works helped to dispel the view of the 'unchanging east' as postulated by earlier historians (see item 210). These works also make it clear that Kandy's response to the west began much earlier than the nineteenth century. Dewaraja's argument would also fail to explain why the northern regions of Ceylon directly exposed to the western impact since the second quarter of the sixteenth century has failed to attract modern historians any more than the central highlands of Kandy.

The bibliography which is appended consists of two parts. The first is a fairly comprehensive list of all primary sources together with guides and introductions to them provided by modern writers. The second part consists of a select list of published secondary works. Items have been included in the second section only when they make some contribution to our knowledge of the period or more rarely when they reflect interesting examples of historical thinking. Unpublished university theses have been included in this section. In both sections the entries have been arranged alphabetically under the name of the author in the form most widely used: thus QUEYROZ, Fernao de, rather than DE QUEYROZ, Fernao.

Those whose interests are wider than the scope of this bibliography, are referred to two key bibliographical works. The first, *Biblioteca Missionum*, (Aachen and Friedburg), 1916+, 25 volumes is a guide to literature connected with western trading and missionary activity. The second, H. A. I. Goonetilleke's *A bibliography of Ceylon: A systematic guide to the literature, on the*

land, people, history and culture published in western languages from the sixteenth century to the present day. Inter-Documentation Co. Zug (Switz), 1970, 2 vols. (Biblioteca Asiatica 5) provides a comprehensive coverage of its subject.

It is perhaps relevant to make some comments here on the unpublished documents available for the period. D. de Silva's 'A bibliography of manuscripts relating to Ceylon in the archives and libraries of Portugal', published in *Boletim International de Bibliografia Luso-Brasileira* (Vol. VIII, 1967, pp. 533-552 and 647-675 and Vol. VIII, 1968, pp. 84-157 and 499-527, also issued under separate cover by H. W. Cave & Co., Ltd. Colombo, 1972) provides a comprehensive guide to the material in the more important archives of Portugal. Some idea of the Goan collections may be obtained from C. R. Boxer's 'A glimpse of the Goan Archives' in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* (Vol. XIV, 1952, pp. 299-324). A glance at the bibliographies of T. Abeysinghe (161), C. R. de Silva (210) and G. D. Winius (338) will also make it clear that relevant Portuguese documents are also available, though in smaller quantities at Madrid, Simancas, Rome, London and Paris. Similarly, some idea of the Dutch manuscript sources for this period may be obtained from K. W. Goonewardena's book (240). K. D. Somadasa has compiled a catalogue of Sinhalese palm-leaf manuscripts in Ceylon and the British Museum entitled *Sinhala Puskala poth namavaliya*, Colombo, 1959, 3 vols. but this work is not annotated and does not give a complete coverage.

List of Periodicals

<i>Abbreviations</i>	<i>Periodicals</i>
	<i>Aloysian</i> (Galle)
	<i>Arqueologia e Historia</i> (Lisbon)
	<i>Arquivo Portugues Historico</i> (Lisbon)
	<i>Boletim da Sociedade de Geografia de Lisboa</i>
	<i>Boletim de la Real Sociedad Geografica</i> (Madrid)
	<i>Buddhist</i> (Colombo)
	<i>Burlington Magazine</i> (London)
CALR	<i>Ceylon Antiquary and Literary Register</i> (Colombo)
	<i>Ceylon Causerie</i> (Colombo)
	<i>Ceylon Fortnightly Review</i> (Colombo)
CHJ	<i>Ceylon Historical Journal</i> (Dehiwela)
CJHSS	<i>Ceylon Journal of Historical and Social Studies</i> (Peradeniya)
	<i>Ceylon Law Recorder</i> (Colombo)
CLR	<i>Ceylon Literary Register</i> (Colombo)
CLR 3 Ser.	<i>Ceylon Literary Register, Third Series</i> (Colombo)
CNR	<i>Ceylon National Review</i> (Colombo)
	<i>Ceylon Review</i> (Colombo)
	<i>History Today</i> (London)
	<i>Ilnkathir</i> (Peradeniya)
DBUJ	<i>Journal of the Dutch Burgher Union of Ceylon</i> (Colombo)
	<i>Journal of the National Education Society of Ceylon</i> (Peradeniya)
JCBRAS	<i>Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society—Ceylon Branch</i> (Colombo)