

Book Review

**“Dutch and British Colonial Intervention in Sri Lanka
1780-1815: Expansion and Reform”**

Monograph Vol., 7 of TPNAP Monographs, Leiden- Boston, 2007

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Received: 13 November 2012

Accepted: 8 February 2013

As the title of the book points to, the study of both Dutch and British periods has been attempted by the author in this single monograph but the British phase is restricted to the intervention in the maritime areas. In this phase, the Dutch experiment formed the guiding principle in laying down the administrative policy except for Governor North's ill-conceived introduction of Madras tax farmers which led to revolt and their recall. The Dutch administrator of Batticaloa, the young Swiss merchant, Jacob Burnand had influenced the British system of early administration so much so that the author observes that 'by adopting the image of the former regime to his own ideals, by stressing its stability, experienced and what he called "enlightened" background, Burnand legitimized Maitland's own course in the island, based on his own idea about the progress and development of societies'.

The main attempt of the book is to unravel that colonial history, especially that of the Dutch in Sri Lanka was not a mere question of commercial and colonial expansionist interest but there was an underlying human interest as well. This is brought out by detailed references to the work carried out by the Dutch administration especially under the dispensation of Governor Willem Jacob Van de Graaff from, 1785 onwards. That latter period, however, coincides with the period of decline in the Dutch rule in the island and therefore could be seen as less vigorous than the execution of their commercial and expansionists interests.

In keeping with the objectives of the series of these monographs as outlined by the Series Editor, Leonard Blussé, under which the research on this book was supported and published by TANAP – *Towards a New Age of Partnership* - , the book seeks to paint the Dutch rule in the island with a more humane brush, especially outlining those aspects which have not received the attention of earlier generation of historiographers including the three more recent of them, K.W. Goonewardene, S. Arasaratnam and V. Kanapatypillai who concentrated more on political aspects and peripherally on others.

A humanitarian discourse is introduced on the role of three other Dutch officials other than Governor Willem Jacob Van de Graaff. The role of these three officials in the island has not been studied in any depth or even marginally so far by any scholar of Dutch history. These are Lieutenant Thomas Nagel who brought the Vanni directly under the Dutch administration under a five year contract with the Company as the first *Landraad* there from 1789 and improved its agriculture; Jaques Fabrice Van Sanden who paid attention to the development of the Trincomalee area; and Jacob Burnand, the Swiss merchant who was employed by the Company in bringing the Batticaloa area under the plough. The author sees these three subordinate officers having been "inspired by European ideas about progress in society, trying to develop the countryside and to stimulate cultivation of more land and to increase the agrarian output but local inhabitants resisting the efforts which led to clashes between the colonial overlords and subjects".

Nagel had been seen by early writers who made brief references to him including myself more recently, in a somewhat negative role as far as the human factor was concerned but in the present study the author sees a far more positive stance even in Nagel's very adverse remarks about the people of the Vanni as the ones in the lowest scale of human development – most unclean people he knew who bathed in dirty water, among their own excrements and their buffaloes - and Vanniyars as very tyrannical headmen. Nagel underpinned his views further by saying they had no common memory whatsoever of that ancient society in either written or oral traditions. [of which there was evidence]. They did not know even how they arrived at the Vanni. [Fn.334.].

These observations by Nagel were an embarrassment. His agricultural reforms only can be seen as bearing results. The author tends to be critical of his views and raises doubts about whether it was really applicable to the circumstances of the people or whether it was intended as rhetoric. She thinks

Nagel may have exaggerated the situation to appeal to the moral sentiments of his superiors in order to obtain permission for his plans for the complete subjugation of the Vanni. He gave strong proof of the need for Company's intervention and of his own inseparability to the mission. She also brings in archival evidence to show he made immense profits from sale of jungle timber and Mullaitivu where he had his comfortable dwelling was a smugglers' paradise but makes no imputations. A point that she has missed, however, is one that the rhetoric may be a defence for involving the Company in a war in the Vanni involving heavy expenses, something over which the higher administration in Batavia was always concerned in general and had avoided all along. (My paper on the Vanni and Vanni chieftaincies in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* refers, 1995) but this too can be covered by the suggestion of rhetoric.

She also questions why Nagel was not concerned with issues like liberty and equality though he wrote so much about enlightenment. On the contrary, he re-introduced bonded labour (the reference is to *Rajakariya* though it cannot be considered bonded labour) and obviously, made full use of it to obtain his result in agriculture.

Van Senden too stressed his 'superiority' and complained about the character of the inhabitants but the author sees that in contrast to Nagel, he did not criticize the institutions, laws and religion of the inhabitants. He set his own example by setting up a garden himself for others to emulate and tried to involve the native headmen to persuade the people to reform their attitudes. The author finally sees in Nagel's 'rhetoric' and Van Sanden's vision of improvement of the lot of the people of the Muttur, Tampalagama and Kattukulam pattu areas, a strong Dutch spirit of the time. This is the object of discussion of this rather unpalatable evidence to turn them to advantage and in a positive direction.

The role of Burnand's development project of the Batticaloa area was seen as far more positive for purpose of emphasizing benefits from Dutch rule. In contrast to Nagel and Van Sanden he did not speak of a 'civilizing mission'. Nor did he emphasise the 'superior' Dutchman vs. 'primitive native' idea as the other two did. He believed in the progress of society and the vocation of the colonial official as one of promoting it. A point that the author does not comment on is

that Kaddukulam Pattu was the only area that the Dutch did not bring under direct rule of the Company but allowed the Vanniya Segerra Segara to continue in consideration that his father transferred allegiance from the King of Kandy to the Company. The result, as one can see is that agriculture remained backward there compared to areas like Tampalagama and Kottiyarama. Even in the early British period, Kaddukulam Pattu interior consisted of a few scattered Sinhalese jungle villages along the ancient pilgrim route from Tiiriyaya to Anuradhapura. Tamils and Muslims lived along a few coastal villages north of Trincomalee all of which had been earlier Sinhalese villages.

Burnand's view of Dutch rulers as 'enlightened and authoritarian' was later used as a model even by the British Governor, Maitland, has been commented upon by the author in greater detail to support the main theses of the book. Burnand was used by the Swiss Colonel, De Muuren whose regiment switched allegiance to the British during the war with the Dutch. Through De Muuren, he also became the chief source of Cleghorn's famous Minute. A reference I quoted in my writing about a Company of Cochin soldiers being settled by Burnand as husbandmen in the Panama area is given more authentic support in this study where the author refers to them as a battalion of *Sepiahs*. (Sepoys).

One has to separate the rhetoric (panegyric) aspects of Burnand's views from the actual situation. As the author herself sees it, Burnand was looking at his own contribution through the reference to administration of his Dutch superiors. Burnand's positive role apart in promoting Dutch interests not only in development of agriculture in the Batticaloa area but also in territorial expansion and expanding the demographic map, (the area's population had increased to 45,000 souls, half of which the Trincomalee district possessed even a century later), Maitland would have found him a useful instrument to build up a personality cult for himself as for Dutch Governors. The contrast was found in men like Pieter Sluijsken in Galle and Bartholomeus Raket in Jaffna who had an ongoing feud with Governor Graaff as seen from the mass of his private correspondence found in private collections in The Hague and other official documents.

What the author tries to derive from this somewhat unpalatable discourse on the respective views of two Dutch officials, though seeing that they may be very well be promoting their career perspectives by revealing a

'thorough-going image of themselves' and applying other critiques, is that their views "reflected the Dutch world view and the empathy the two officials expressed for the 'natives' was part of this ideology". Despite the problematic nature specially of Nagel's position, the author sees in them two vigorous Company official who ruled over his subjects in a just, paternalistic manner. From an overall perspective it might only appear that the discourse might help soften attitudes towards Dutch rule. The author summed up that since all three officials worked closely with the Governor, his basic assumption of the colonial relations could not have been fundamentally different. That seals the issue. The purpose of the long discourse then is not without purpose. It adds to the thesis that the role of the three officials like that of the governor was the concept of the Dutch as benevolent administrator.

As a result of keeping to the objectives, in this book, some of the accepted views have come under close scrutiny. This is specially found in the critique of the position that traditional land tenure in the island went through a reform only after the British commenced administering the country from 1796. The author through her extensive research of Dutch archives in Netherlands, U.K. and Sri Lanka has surfaced evidence to show that it was not quite so. Evidence is submitted to show how local enterprise in plantation and agriculture commenced during Dutch rule first with the shift to cultivation of cinnamon in gardens experimented by Governor Jan Baron Van Eck and Iman Willem Flack and more vigorously under Governor Graaff and later extended to other crops like coffee, pepper and coconut, was neglected during early British rule. The best example cited is the case of the Diviture estate in Southwest adjoining the village where I was born and grew up which Governor Graaff permitted the *Mahamudaliyar* [of *Governor's Gate*] Nicholas Dias Abeysinghe to develop under a five year contract. The *Mahamudaliyar* was the interpreter for the Dutch in their negotiations with the Kandyan chiefs. (One of Sluijsken's accusations against the Governor was that *Mahamudliyar* was leading the Dutch to war with Kandy). That goes to show the influence he wielded. The former agricultural enterprise at Diviture was not continued after the transfer to the British rule. The plantation came to be neglected during this regime change and in 1809 the Collector noted that the estate was flooded. The inhabitants complained that "after this place surrendered to the British Crown the work of this country was neglected and not continued and that therefore by the falling of trees in those rivulets caused the course of the water to be stopped and was filled up again." I am personally familiar with the condition of these rivers- the tributaries of Gin Ganga – hw low

lying and threatening they were even in normal times not to speak of when flooded. The estate later formed two large British company estates, Diviture and Pathiraja, each comprising over several thousands of acres under rubber and some under tea.

The significance that Michael Roberts attached to the rise of the Sinhalese elite under the late Dutch and early British rule can be seen coming under close scrutiny in this analysis. The author has found evidence of the Karavas having already cooperated with the Dutch in their private enterprise and taking over part of their economic position after the change of the [Dutch] regime. She observes that on the one hand, the increased private activities of the Dutch activities gave the Karavas the opportunities to join their activities, with the change of regime and economic decline of the Dutch enabled them to step into their shoes. This also accounts, according to her, the growth of power of *mudaliyars*, native headmen in the Southwest which Patrick Peeble connected to the British take over but which she now proves, had much stronger roots in the 18th century when they already became a major landowning class [under the Dutch].

The other major point in the author's analysis, though only subsidiary to the main thesis is the relationship of colonial powers and the Kandyan kingdom. The general theory proposed by most historians is that the Sinhalese chiefs deposed their South Indian king in 1815 and more or less invited the British to their kingdom which has more recently been explained as a manifestation Sinhalese nationalism (or ethnic consciousness), or by aggressive British expansionism is not accepted here. While the above views are brought under critical survey the author proposes that the fall of the kingdom was brought about by economic and political factors within the kingdom. She shows how the political balance was inherently unstable and suffered continuously from internal tensions among chiefs which were reinforced by the intrigues of the Dutch. Pilimatalauve, the first Adigar, first negotiated with the Dutch. When negotiating with the British, he was far more adept.

One may see this as an attempt to shift the discourse from one of moral responsibility perspective to a circumstantial one. The clash of interest between the Nayakkar relatives of the king and the Chiefs has been brought out to emphasise the damage caused by economic factors within the kingdom – the hold of the Nayakkar relatives on the economy. Though the author has not

brought it out, in my own writing I have pointed out how the leading chiefs were in financial debt to these Nayakkar relatives which led to antipathy towards them and this was more fundamental than any ethnic considerations. The author herself discounts the ethnic factor. The chiefs were 'eating off the hands' of these Nayakkar elite, she observes. Whether we have sufficient evidence to extract so much from the clash of interest between the Nayakkar relatives and the Chiefs is a debatable point. It seems to me that overdevelopment of the thesis here can have the effect of a counterpoint to the economic strangulation of the Kandyan kingdom by the Dutch. The author says the chiefs were looking for 'new-rulers' and even the Dutch and later the British were acceptable to them.

While there cannot be any denying of this appreciation of the positive aspects of Dutch rule, a closer study and comparison of events under earlier administrations could have illustrated the other side of the Dutch rule, especially its role in creating conditions for the fall of the Kandyan kingdom by economically strangling it. That was the result of closing of all ports and access to the sea. The restriction imposed on the removal of the vital ingredient of salt by the Kandyans, albeit the refusal of the Batavia administration to approve it, is something which cannot stand the testimony of any humanitarian considerations. It was simply a strategy of strangulation and expansion. Today, it would constitute a crime against humanitarian laws and a 'war crime'. The reason behind the Dutch administration encircling the Kandyan kingdom leading to its economic isolation and finally even illegally extending their hegemony over the king's territory in the East and Southeast, need better appraisal.

Governor Graaff's administration has received far greater attention almost to the neglect of study of administration under other Governors even by way of comparison and contrast. This is because the research project was confined to the period of Governor Graaff onwards it is under this much misunderstood ruler (also by modern historians like Kanapathypillai), that the author sees the humanitarian side of Dutch administration at its full play.

In the process of discussion of the main thesis, the book brings out a good deal of valuable information by way of background to the study as well as related issues including relations with Kandy and changes in Dutch policy in respect of the island, and as noted above, the decision to cultivate cinnamon as a cash crop rather than depend on jungle cinnamon from the king's territory which brought the Company into a close relationship with chieftains in the Southwest leading

also to the latter's participation in plantation agriculture. In the end two distinctively different relationships developed in regard to local chiefs. In the Vanni and in the east, they were eliminated altogether and Dutch officials took over the administration directly into their hands. In the Southwest, it was the opposite. Though the Dutch did not like the tight hold of the chiefs on labour, they needed their service very much and it ended up in economic partnership, the chiefs emerging as owners of plantations. In Jaffna it was different. One single chief, Ritna Singa, as renter paid rents in 1875 which were more than half of the rent paid in the whole peninsula. Chetty Waitelinge was the other highest payer of rent.

The book deserves to be read by everyone who may wish to see the Dutch rule in a different perspective to what one has been exposed so far. Though it is a serious academic work considering that it is backed by copious archival material far more analytically than used in any work on the subject so far, and incorporates even those which had not been of interest to others like Nagel's Memorandum, Van Sanden's reports and Burnand's *"Fragments on Ceylon"* and many others, the author has presented the essence for easy reading. She has not overburdened the reader with archival details in the body of the text. These are left in notes and references for perusal of serious readers. Above all, the lucid flow in style of writing (specially avoiding long complex sentences) makes reading easy even for the average reader. It is a thought provoking work and with its copious notes and references are an invitation for further research on the Dutch administration in Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, it is a little too late for me. I hope more resourceful persons will take the cue.