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Dutch and British colonial intervention in Sri Lanka, 1780 - 1815: expansion and reform

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CHAPTER THREE

BEYOND CINNAMON: DUTCH INTERIOR POLICY 1780-1795

3.1 *Introduction*

During the hundred fifty years of their presence on Sri Lanka the Dutch produced a huge amount of maps and plans of the island. Recently D. Paranavitana and R.K. de Silva brought these together in one publication.¹³¹ The atlas provides a fine visual overview of the colonial intervention that took place progressively over the years. The early maps show the whole island, with all the Dutch forts along the coast and only the interiors of the southwest and the Jaffna peninsula outlined as Dutch possessions. Often, the rest of the map is filled with bushes, rocks and exotic animals, although sometimes indigenous regional names are given. Early drawings are also found of the various forts on the coast. It is not however until the 1750s that we get a better picture of the various provinces of the interior. Balthus van Lier's detailed maps of some of the districts of Galle, Colombo and Jaffna reveal some of the increased inland activities discussed in the last chapter.¹³²

In 1789, long after the war with Kandy was over, a large map of the whole island was drawn up for Governor Willem Jacob van de Graaff (1785-1794). The boundary between the Dutch and Kandyan regions was drawn by a clear red line, and the designer of the map gave the Dutch a very generous share of the island. What makes it so interesting is that the enormous map provides very detailed information on all areas under Dutch rule including the marginal areas, like the Magampattu and Panoa in the southeast and the Vanni in the north. The areas are split up into administrative sections, churches are shown, villages are named, large water tanks are indicated and even some of the outstanding ancient ruins around Anuradhapura have been given a place on the map.¹³³ Other maps of the interior drawn up in the same period show us the exact location of cinnamon gardens and plantations in the vicinity of Colombo, and there are detailed plans for irrigation works in the Manaar region and Matara. These maps underscore the fact that the 1780s and 1790s were a period of yet more intense colonial encroachment on the island.¹³⁴

Governor Van de Graaff, who had commissioned these maps, is a forgotten figure in Dutch and Sri Lankan historiography. If he is mentioned at all, it is in relation to the cinnamon plantations or regarding his dramatic fate after he left Ceylon for Batavia.¹³⁵ The contemporary sources

present an ambiguous picture of the period and the governor in question. While someone like Jaques Fabrice van Senden, the head of Trincomalee, called him affectionately “the illustrious brother who [...] steers the little vessel Ceylon”,¹³⁶ Pieter Sluijsken, the commander of Galle repeatedly labelled him authoritarian and selfish and accused him of developing sinister plans and projects on the island.¹³⁷

Selfish or illustrious, it is clear that Van de Graaff was an interesting character. Combined with the dynamic impression that we get from the maps made during his rule, this makes one curious about this last phase of Dutch rule on the island. The events of the 1750s and 1760s foreshadowed the global unrest and political changes of the 1780s. The disintegration of the Mughal empire, the British and French agitation in South India, the rise of strong regional power holders like the Sultan of Mysore and the general declining position of the VOC in the Indian Ocean brought the crisis close to the island, and changes in Dutch policies on interior Sri Lanka should be placed in the context of these developments.

The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first discusses on a more general level these changes in policy as well as the international and local impulses for change. A need for economic resources pushed the Company further inland as it searched for more efficient forms of surplus extraction and actively involved itself in the agricultural production. The last required large investments that could be easily recouped in the long run. The second part of the chapter discusses the changes in policy and the continued colonial intrusion in the core areas. How did this further encroachment affect the relationship between the native headmen and the Company, a relationship that was already tense and problematic before the 1780s, as we saw in the last chapter? Chapter Four also deals with the peripheral areas that, as seen in the map of 1789, were more or less taken over by the colonial government, and it includes a discussion of the new encounters in these underdeveloped regions and the attempts of the colonial officials to impose more direct forms of rule here.

3.2 Changing circumstances – the cinnamon plantations

After years of travelling in the east, the famous Swedish botanist Thunberg resided in Ceylon between 4 January 1777 and 14 March 1778. Following his return to Europe he published a two-volume account of his experiences and he devoted several chapters to his stay on Ceylon. His account includes lengthy descriptions of the island's flora, and he also gives some insight into the social life on the island. The systematic cultivation of cinnamon attracted his interest. In his description of the garden

of Governor Falck he ponders on the problematic start of the cultivation of cinnamon. He writes how the cinnamon trees were naturally spread around the forest with the help of the birds who dumped its pits after eating its fruits. The Dutch originally believed that cinnamon trees only germinated in the wild and that it could not successfully be cultivated. This lasted until Falck started growing young cinnamon trees in his garden in 1769. As Thunberg recounts:

They planted the pits and these germinated well, but soon the young plants withered and died. They searched carefully for the cause of this destruction so premature and unexpected: it was discovered that the Sinhalese who gained considerable profit from the bark of the wild cinnamon trees, feared that their profits would diminish from its cultivation and its propagation by individuals. Therefore they decided to ruin the Dutch attempts and succeeded by pouring hot water over the young stems.¹³⁸

After this ruse was discovered, many new trees were planted and grew up yielding successful harvests of the cinnamon bark. More plantations were started in Sitavake, Kalutara, and Matara. Thunberg expressed his enthusiasm about this project and prophesied that in the course of time the Company would draw much more profit from the cultivated trees than from those in the forest, the produce of which was decreasing.¹³⁹

It was the *dessava* De Coste who was responsible for the spread of the cinnamon plantations when it was decided to produce cinnamon on a larger scale by involving the headmen in planting cinnamon gardens during the 1770s. In 1774, the Dutch government started handing out bonuses and medals to those headmen who involved themselves in the cultivation of cinnamon trees. In 1776, it was decided to encourage everyone in the Colombo and Galle *dessavony* to cultivate the tree by promising 1 rixdollar per 30 pounds of cinnamon.¹⁴⁰ Despite these incentives and Thunberg's enthusiasm, in 1780 the majority of the cinnamon still came from the "wild" trees in the Dutch and Kandyan forests. In fact it was only in 1786 that the government commenced with paying out the promised bounty.¹⁴¹ Of course it took some time before the newly planted trees were ready to be peeled. Another reason for the tardiness was that, in the initial years, mistakes had been made in the type of ground on which the trees were planted and often the distance between the trees was too small, as a result of which the trees stood in each other's way and did not grow as large as they should.

It was under Governor Van de Graaff that the plantations really took off. With great zeal he promoted the cultivation of cinnamon. He managed to excite many more of the headmen into cultivating the tree through the rewards, and even military and civil servants of the Company began planting trees. These operations cost the Company about 33,000 guilders a year, mainly to cover the costs of rice for the labourers who

cleared and maintained the lands and planted the trees.¹⁴² They generally worked without further payment as part of their *corvée* duties. By the end of the 1780s, Van de Graaff came to realize that there were not enough people to labour on the plantations of the Company and the other gardens, which after being planted, had to be constantly maintained to prevent them from being overgrown. The demand on the cinnamon peelers and the coolies had become too great.

Moreover, in 1789 Batavia wrote to Colombo that the expenses for the cinnamon gardens were growing out of hand, and instructed the governor to delay the work for the time being. In 1791, Van de Graaff came up with a new proposal, which had been suggested by his *mahāmudaliyār* Nicolaas Dias Abeysinghe. The Company's plantations were to be split up in small plots and given away to the cinnamon peelers, who had to maintain these and were responsible for peeling the bark. In his memoir to Johan Gerard van Angelbeek, written four years later, Van de Graaff reflected enthusiastically on this measure. To further stimulate the peelers, official title deeds, in Dutch and Sinhalese, were printed in September 1793 to be given away to the peelers who had received such lands. In total fifteen hundred deeds were printed.¹⁴³

During Van de Graaff's tenure, the Company servants and local chiefs endeavoured in planting cinnamon trees, and once they had completed a garden they often sold it to the Company.¹⁴⁴ The chiefs were rewarded for their loyal work with golden medals and other presents. Van de Graaff also found another means to stimulate the production of the cinnamon, one that could also be put into practice for other products like pepper, coffee or areca nuts. This was to give the Company's wasteland to anyone ready to cultivate it, and to demand in return that one-third of the ground was to be cultivated with one of these products, depending on the type of soil. This type of land lease was called *thunval*.¹⁴⁵ Many people therefore planted cinnamon trees in their private gardens for the Company, and had these peeled by the cinnamon peelers. The *dessavas* and the *mudaliyārs* were in charge of granting of these waste lands. Altogether, Van de Graaff's measures led to the advantageous situation in the 1790s that most of the cinnamon collected for the VOC to be sold in the Dutch Republic, usually around 5,000 bales or 400,000 pounds, came from the private gardens and the Company's plantations. As the rest was still peeled from the Company's forests, Van de Graaff emphasized in 1794 that it was no longer necessary to harvest the king's forests.

Among those who opposed Van de Graaff's measures figured Pieter Sluijsken. He wrote long petitions in which he explained to the government of Ceylon and to the High Government in Batavia that Van de Graaff's measures were a disaster. He argued that the trees were not planted on the right grounds and that it was unwise to let the natives grow

cinnamon because they would not know which seeds to use. According to Burnand, Sluijsken was particularly troubled by the developments in the cinnamon production because he had been captain of the cinnamon for eight years in the 1770s, but had not been responsible for the planting of the cinnamon trees. He was still working hard on his career, and the new developments diminished the function of captain of the cinnamon, and therefore they jeopardized his career.¹⁴⁶ In any case, Sluijsken's writings against Van de Graaff had far-reaching results for Van de Graaff's career and for his reputation among historians.¹⁴⁷

The historian Kanapathypillai has been much influenced by Sluijsken's writings in his publication on the cinnamon production in the last decades of the eighteenth century. In consequence, he argues that the planting of cinnamon was unsuccessful. He used Sluijsken's arguments concerning the quality of the cinnamon, and corroborates these by arguing that the plantations never produced more than 5,000 bales. This is a strange argument, since the yearly requirements from the Netherlands were 5,000 bales.¹⁴⁸ To secure the right type of cinnamon for the European taste, samples were sent of different trees from different grounds to the Netherlands, yet he forgets to mention that the *Heren Zeventien* were content with the quality of the produce.¹⁴⁹ Van de Graaff presented the endeavours as a great success in his *memorie van overgave* to his successor Van Angelbeek in July 1794. Moreover, and upon their arrival in Ceylon, the British found an abundance of cinnamon in the Company's stores and managed to get enough cinnamon from the plantations and gardens for the first two years.¹⁵⁰ This underlines Van de Graaff's success.

More interesting is Kanapathypillai's discussion of illicit private trade, which was absolutely forbidden but daily business according to some early British officials on the island.¹⁵¹ Clearly the High Government in Batavia worried about this too and this was one of the reasons why it planned to write to the government of Ceylon in 1797, in case the island was to return under Dutch rule, that no further expansion of the cinnamon culture was required.¹⁵²

Leaving the discussion on the quality and quantity aside, there were three important elements in this new policy that need to be highlighted because of their further consequence. First, self-sufficiency in cinnamon cultivation relieved the government of its dependence on Kandy. As we will see in Chapter Six, this did not imply an improvement of relations between the two, because Van de Graaff had in the mean time readjusted his ambitions and set his mind on the fertile lowland districts of Kandy. Second, now that the cinnamon was being cultivated, the inhabitants of Colombo and Galle were freed from the strict regulations regarding clearances of land, and *chēna* and coconut cultivation. Thirdly, the native headmen were cooperating enthusiastically in the cinnamon-enterprise

and must have enriched themselves by it. The problematic situation as it had existed in the 1750s seems to have blown over by the 1780s and this created space for further agricultural development of the island. No doubt, the changing international circumstances drove Van de Graaff to strive hard for such development.

3.3 *Changing international conditions*

In the National Archives of Sri Lanka there is a letter book of correspondence between Governor Van Angelbeek and the Commissioners General, written between 1794 and 1795. The Commissioners General, Nederburgh and Frijkenius, had been sent to the east to research the state of finances and government in the east and to set up a plan for improvements.¹⁵³ Part of the correspondence concerned the finances of Ceylon, which they found in a disappointing state after their arrival in Batavia in 1794. They wrote a letter on 21 May 1794 to Ceylon urging Governor Van de Graaff to justify himself before he embarked for Batavia, where he was supposed to take up the position of Director General. The letter was only received in February 1795 and Van de Graaff had already left for Batavia, but his successor Van Angelbeek answered the letter and quite extensively explained and justified Van de Graaff's spending pattern. In his reply Van Angelbeek pointed at certain changing circumstances that had affected the Company's position on the island adversely.¹⁵⁴

Van Angelbeek could not deny that the general expenses of the government of Ceylon had risen in the previous fifteen years. In fact, he gave an overview of the expenses between 1779 and 1792 and showed how they had increased during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War (1780-1784) and remained high ever since.¹⁵⁵ Of course, in the first instance this rise was related to that particular war. Extra expenses were made to improve the defence works and to maintain the additional troops, namely three companies of *Oosterlingen*, that came to the island. These extra troops were sent from Batavia, and had been recruited at higher wages than the regular troops on Ceylon. In addition, in 1783 the regiment of Luxemburg arrived from the Cape, which in turn added to the increase of expenses.¹⁵⁶ The end of the war did not result in a decline of expenses because the extra troops stayed on until 1788/89, when they were replaced by a new mercenary regiment from Switzerland under the Count de Meuron. The preparations for the homeward voyage of the Luxemburgers and the arrival of the Meuron regiment caused the extra expenses for that year. The large expenses for the year 1791-1792 had a military cause: troops from the Würtemberg regiment arrived, as did four companies of *Oosterlingen* from Batavia and a batallion of Sipahis from Tuticorin. Thus,

according to Van Angelbeek, the military expenses accounted for the larger part of the rise in costs of the Ceylon government.¹⁵⁷

However, Van Angelbeek continued, there were other reasons for the rise in expenses. First of all, a lack of bullion led to a devaluation of the copper coins and letters of credit and caused an increase in prices for basic necessities like rice and arrack. He pointed out that while earlier on a *legger* of arrack from Batavia had cost about 28 rixdollars, now it costs 50 rixdollars. At the same time, the Company had issued new regulations on the supply of arrack to the troops and thus forced the government of Ceylon to take on the extra expenses. Products from Europe had also risen in price since the war. The continuing tense situation with European competitors after the war had forced the government to invest in the repair of fortifications. In particular those of Oostenburg (Trincomalee) and Galle had needed much repair. Another point was that while during Falck's governorship Ceylon had been adequately supplied with rice from Batavia, this source of supply fell off after the war and the government of Ceylon was forced to purchase more expensive rice from Malabar, Coromandel and Bengal. Finally, the work on the cinnamon plantations and gardens had required large investments from the Company; however, Van Angelbeek quickly added, these investments were already paying off.

Van Angelbeek also compared the general income under Van de Graaff with that under Falck. By doing so, he put Van de Graaff's expenses in perspective and made them look less dramatic. Moreover, he pointed out that the merits of Van de Graaff's government really lay in his capability of increasing the income of the island.¹⁵⁸ The average income under Falck was f 557,244 and this grew to an average of f 845,291.125 during van de Graaff. This was an increase of nearly fifty per cent. Basically, Van Angelbeek reasoned that the extra expenses made by Van de Graaff were to be explained by circumstantial factors, while his enterprising spirit made sure that at least the damage was limited by the increasing revenue. Therefore, Van Angelbeek argued, Van de Graaff was not to be blamed for the bad financial situation of the island's government, but rather to be praised for his endeavours!¹⁵⁹

3.4 *Company in crisis*

Before moving on to the actual measures taken by Van de Graaff to raise the income, it is important to explore at greater length the circumstantial factors mentioned by Van Angelbeek and place them in a wider context, in order to fully understand their implications on the government of Ceylon. They were all related in one way or another to the Company's worsening situation in Asia from about 1780 onwards. Van Angelbeek's

remarks are more or less confirmed by Els Jacobs in her study on the developments in the business of the East India Company in Asia in the eighteenth century.¹⁶⁰

Perhaps the most profound change that occurred over the course of the eighteenth century was the changing pattern of trade within Asia. Jacobs pays much attention to the growing importance of the textile trade and the simultaneous growth of the British and French trading companies in the region of South Asia. Not only did the British and the French manage to obtain good contracts with local producers and to expand their authority on the Indian subcontinent, they also managed to obtain large amounts of the copper that was so necessary for this branch of trade. Instead of Japan, where the Dutch got their copper from exclusively, they turned to Sweden and China. In doing so they undermined the strong position of the Dutch in the intra-Asian trading network, and this situation was enhanced by the fact that the Dutch received less and less copper from the Japanese in the course of the eighteenth century. Consequently, by the 1780s the Company was suffering from a serious lack of copper, not only in Batavia, but also in South Asia. In contrast, the booming business of the British brought more and more copper into the Indian continent, and caused inflation of prices there. Indeed, as pointed out by Van Angelbeek, Ceylon was affected negatively by this development. All products usually derived from India, mainly rice and cloth, now increased in price, while the amount of copper available on the island to pay for it was falling.¹⁶¹

In addition, in the aftermath of the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the VOC lost most of its factories on the Indian subcontinent and thereby any advantageous access to its products. The position in Bengal had been steadily deteriorating since the 1750s, and was sharply reduced after the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War when the holdings on the Coromandel coast were also abandoned. Moreover, with the growth of British power on the subcontinent, the security situation for Ceylon changed considerably. The war had exposed the Dutch weakness on the one hand and revealed the maritime and military strength and capability of the British and the French powers on the other. Hence, investments had to be made to repair the defence works and a larger garrison of European troops was installed on the island now. In 1789, a military commission was sent to Asia to examine further the military establishment and to advise the *Heren Zeventien* and the High Government of Batavia on the investments that needed to be made.¹⁶² Van de Graaff took the recommendations of the military commission seriously and began repairing the fortifications even before the *Heren Zeventien* or the High Government approved, which added to Batavia's discontent about Van de Graaff's government.¹⁶³ Thus, Van Angelbeek was right to point this out as an important expense for the

government on Ceylon. On top of everything, the generally bad situation of the Company required a cut in expenses, and Ceylon was no longer furnished with products from elsewhere in Asia on the scale it had been, and fewer and fewer products were arriving from Europe.¹⁶⁴

To conclude then, the shifting trading patterns, the international financial and political situation all affected the government of Ceylon. Van Angelbeek was correct in noting these various factors in his letter to the commissioners general. One of the major problems for the government that resulted from this situation was the lack of rice for the garrisons and the Company's labourers. Falck sought a solution for this in arranging rice contracts with Indian traders and local Dutch entrepreneurs. This once more aroused the interests of the Dutch in the elephants, because the traders from Bengal were still interested therein. The *Chetty* Waite-linge obtained such a contract and secured a regular import of rice in exchange for elephants.¹⁶⁵ Another trader, Blume, proposed a regular supply of rice in exchange for the monopoly in chank shells. In the 1780s, we come across many more such enterprising men, like Dormieux, Graaf van Bijland, and Tranchel from Coromandel and various Jewish and Armenian traders from Malabar.¹⁶⁶ Any opportunity to trade in rice was seized with both hands by the government. However, it could never provide enough and above all, it was still too expensive.¹⁶⁷ Van de Graaff embarked on a new plan to better the financial situation of the island's government and increase the paddy production. Two major themes recur in the following analysis of his policies on the island, namely his administrative adjustments in the core areas and the agricultural projects in the periphery.

3.5 *A testing ground in Galle*

A glance through the *Plakkaatboek*, a compilation of all proclamations made by the Company on Ceylon, and collected and published by Lodewijk Hovy in 1991, shows that Van de Graaff was an exceptionally enterprising governor. During his term of office, Van de Graaff published twice as many proclamations as his predecessor, Falck.¹⁶⁸ Many of these dealt with the inland business of land possessions, the tasks of headmen and rules for the tax farmers. Although these subjects were not entirely absent in the proclamations of his predecessors, their frequency is remarkable. The same is true of Van de Graaff's proclamations regarding life in the towns, where new regulations were issued to secure order and improve health and hygiene. These themes had begun to appear in the last year of Falck's governorship, but then only in the region of Galle and Matara, where Van de Graaff, not coincidentally, was commander.

Van de Graaff had arrived on Ceylon in the 1750s, as had so many others who held high office at this time. On Ceylon he had served as fiscal in Galle and as cinnamon captain, among other functions. In the 1770s, he moved from Ceylon to become head administrator in Malabar and in 1776 he was appointed director of Surat. He fled from Surat to Ceylon during the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, when in 1781 that factory had been taken over by the British. In the same year, he was appointed to succeed Falck, who was to move to Batavia to take up the office of Director General.¹⁶⁹ Falck however refused to do so and stayed on. For that reason, Van de Graaff was appointed governor and director of Coromandel. In June 1784, he was given the commandership of Galle when that position fell vacant on the departure for Batavia of Arnoldus de Lij.¹⁷⁰ His predecessor's eighteen-year-long commandership had been conservative. De Lij had been concerned mainly with the renovation of the town Galle, the transshipments in Galle and the regulations of the bazaars. He was on good terms with Governor Falck, but kept to himself and the business in Galle. Some of the remaining fragments of De Lij's private correspondence show that he was trying for a better position already in 1773 and that he was much grieved to be passed over many times by the authorities in Batavia.¹⁷¹

During his short stint at Galle (June 1784 to January 1785), Van de Graaff ruled like a whirlwind. The minutes of the political council of Galle clearly reflect a change of policy: from the moment of his arrival the regular reports of the daily business on the docks and in the town, which before took in the larger part of the minutes, were interrupted by all sorts of new administrative considerations. Van de Graaff started with cleaning up and tidying the town. He decided to have a new registry made of all inhabitants, and removed all unwanted subjects like the sick beggars, "miserable and helpless people and among them many with contagious diseases, who lay begging here and there along the public roads, and often die in a pitiful manner". He decided to have a special institution erected, where they could be cured and if possible put to work.¹⁷²

These measures were not taken out of the blue. In the previous decades, Galle must have turned into a very unhealthy place. In his memorandum written in 1784 for Van de Graaff, De Lij stated that at least a quarter of the garrison was infected with some contagious disease, which he called *De Gaalse ziekte* (the Galle sickness). Blaming the water supply, he had constructed a pipe-line from Unawatuna, the next bay to the east, to secure clean water for the inhabitants. Van de Graaff may have suspected from De Lij's description that he was dealing with a venereal disease, because he banned all prostitutes from the inner city.¹⁷³ Hygiene was clearly high on the list of Van de Graaff, and his proclamation regarding the inspection of cattle for slaughter, to prevent sick cattle from being

slaughtered for food, supports that assumption. But safety and discipline were equally important.¹⁷⁴ He decided to renovate the hospital in town and to have certain other company buildings repaired. He made proper regulations regarding the installation of street lights at night and picking up garbage. He limited the amount of *schaggerijen* (pubs) and forbade cockfights and other gambling games. All these measures give the impression that Van de Graaff was consciously working on a civilization programme in this Eurasian port city, but at the same time he tried to limit the costs of the administration of the town and the country as much as possible.

He decided to contract work on the buildings to private builders, who had to come with an offer of the costs beforehand, instead of taking on carpenters on regular wages. By doing so, he put the risk of extra costs with the contractor and not with the Company. In the secretary's office, he took similar measures. He reached the conclusion that the Company continuously hired too many clerks, who were neither competent nor hardworking, and he removed some from the secretary in Galle to Matara, where they could work on the *tombo* registration. He decided to stimulate work by giving the headwriters a certain sum above their salary, for which they could choose to either employ other writers to perform their assigned tasks or work harder themselves. In this way, aspiring clerks had to work hard to prove their value before they were hired for a fixed position.¹⁷⁵

Van de Graaff was not merely interested in the town administration of Galle, but also looked inland at the administration of the Matara *dessavony* and Galle *corle*. His first letter to Colombo as commander of Galle, written on 23 June 1784, mentions the absence of any maps of the Galle *corle* and the Matara *dessavony*, and he wondered whether the copy, which he knew to be available in Colombo, could be sent to Galle to be copied.¹⁷⁶ This reveals on the one hand the neglect of the inland region by his predecessor De Lij, and on the other hand Van de Graaff's eagerness to gain a thorough understanding of the whole region. Moreover, Van de Graaff made a tour through the Matara and Galle districts in July and August, and in the following months he took some far-reaching decisions about the inland administration.¹⁷⁷

First, he decided to forbid in the future the pocketing of *paresses*, or gifts, by the headmen from their inferiors. Second, he issued a proclamation fixing the headmen's duties to the Company, and he had all headmen sign that they would perform the duties as ordered. They were to report yearly on paper what they had done and achieved. A famine in Matara in the months of October and November, due to mismanagement of the fields, may have convinced Van de Graaff that the headmen needed stricter job descriptions and supervision. A native *sabandar* was appoint-

ed to check whether the headmen properly fulfilled their duties.¹⁷⁸ Moreover, the authority of the minor headmen to decide in civil cases was reinforced, the inhabitants were to litigate before their village-head, and if this person could not reach a decision, the case was to be brought before the head of the *corle* or *pattu*. Only when no solution satisfactory to all parties could be reached could the case be brought before the *dessava*.¹⁷⁹

At the same time, Van de Graaff aspired to increase in the revenue. He decided to farm out the paddy-tax since he felt that much more was produced than the share that was levied, and consequently he wrote down new conditions for the rent of the paddy-tax. He also ordered a new registry to be made of the Moorish inhabitants of Galle and Matara, in order to make them properly perform their *oeliam* service, but also allowed them to pay a capitation tax of 12 rixdollars instead.¹⁸⁰ Finally, he noted that in Matara there were too many *naindes*, or coolies, who managed to get themselves registrated as *lascorin*, and he warned the *dessava* of Matara because it implied a decline in the labour force. Eventually, he chose to put the *lascorins* to work more efficiently and proposed to the *dessava* of Matara that, since most of them were not of much use to the Company, they could best be employed in the planting of the trees in the government plantations, whereby he actually degraded them again to the position of *nainde*.¹⁸¹

Altogether, these were ambitious measures, taken in the span of half a year only. Many of these adjustments to the inland and town administration, Van de Graaff later issued island-wide, like the *plakkaat* regarding the *paresses*. Others were considered applicable to the southwest only and consequently put into practice in the Colombo *dessavony*. In all, Van de Graaff's period of office in Galle seems to have functioned as a phase in which he developed and tested his political ideas, which he was to put into practice as governor of Ceylon. At Galle, Van de Graaff showed a strong sense of authority over his Company inferiors and over the native headmen, characteristics that were also found in his administration as governor of Ceylon.

3.6 *An island-wide approach*

Although during the nine years of Van de Graaff's governorship, the focus was really on the inland government, the development of agriculture and increase of revenue, his zeal to improve the order, safety and hygiene in the coastal towns was no less apparent. For the town of Colombo, he reinstalled the neighbourhood councils with explicit and lengthy regulations.¹⁸² To fight the rampant drunkenness among the soldiers, he cut the number of pubs in and around Colombo from one hundred sixteen to

only seventeen. Perhaps most conspicuous was his proclamation which allowed anyone to kill street-robbers at the scene of the crime.¹⁸³ He started a campaign to inoculate all inhabitants against small-pox and provided for an institute where widows and orphans could live and work, in order to improve their situation.¹⁸⁴ Before moving to the actual inland government, it has to be mentioned that Van de Graaff also continued his policy of cutting expenses by putting out construction work and other jobs to contractors on commission instead of keeping them all in regular service of the Company.

In the core areas of the Company's possessions on the island, the *dessavony* of Colombo and the Galle *corle*, Van de Graaff more or less followed the policies he had developed during his days in Galle. Thus, *dessavva* De Cock of Colombo, was ordered early in 1785 to prepare proclamations concerning the headmen of the *corles* and *pattus* after the example of those issued for the headmen of Galle and Matara.¹⁸⁵ These proclamations are worth examining in more detail, since they reveal in many ways Van de Graaff's approach to the inland government. They are thirty-three in total, and deal with all aspects of inland government: the promotion of the cinnamon culture, the supervision of the paddy culture, the expansion of cash-cropping on the wastelands and the organization of the labour force.¹⁸⁶

To start with the first two, related to cinnamon production. The central role of the headmen in the new system of cinnamon procurement has already been pointed out above, but the proclamations show how determined Van de Graaff was to involve the headmen further. He ordered them to keep a register of all existing plantings of cinnamon trees in their *corle* or *pattu* and to keep an eye on these plantings. The headmen also had to make sure that these were well maintained, and whenever possible they were to increase the number of plantings. Van de Graaff also exhorted them to devote their energies to planting cinnamon trees on all other suitable grounds. If they observed these duties with great zeal and with good results, the proclamation assured that this would be acknowledged and that they would receive a reward in the form of a medal with a necklace or any other object that would give them distinction. Moreover, their efforts would strengthen their own position, since good work was also rewarded with honourable jobs and duties. On the other hand, the proclamation stated explicitly, those who did not perform well would be put out of office.¹⁸⁷

3.7 *Beyond cinnamon*

The next five points in the proclamations for the headmen of the *corles* and *pattus* of Colombo and Galle regarded supervision of the paddy cul-

ture. The headmen had to make sure that the paddy was sowed properly and on time. These proclamations also extended their authority beyond the Company lands to include all private land. The dykes and canals had to be kept in repair to prevent flooding of the fields. Moreover the headmen had to stimulate the growth of products like areca nuts, teakwood and cashcrops like cardamom, pepper and coffee and to make sure that no arable lands remained fallow. Abandoned servicelands, called *mallepalle* or *nielepalle*, were placed in charge of the headmen and were to be cultivated by them.¹⁸⁸

In the proclamation the headmen were not only deemed instrumental for the organization of agriculture, but also for the regulation of the labour force in their regions. They were to register all persons inhabiting the area, and had to make sure that everyone liable for service was employed on time. They were not allowed to take bribes from the inhabitants to avoid the service, nor were they allowed to use labourers for their own purpose. The appropriation of labour had always been a source of conflict between the headmen and the Company in the southwest. Now that the headmen were involved in cinnamon production and other cash crops for the Company, this problem was at least somewhat overcome: the labourers were now supposed to work in all plantations and the work was for the benefit of both the Company and the owner of the plantation.

A proclamation of 1787 underlines this once again. Everyone in Galle and Colombo was urged to cultivate cinnamon, pepper, coffee, areca nuts and other products. Anyone able to keep gardens in good order could apply to the *dessava* for rice to feed the labourers, and they could even ask for tools.¹⁸⁹ From the resolutions of the *Inlandsch Departement* it is clear that many such requests were actually made, and by all sorts of people: Moors, Burghers, *Karāvas*, *Chetties*, *Goyigama* headmen, and so on.¹⁹⁰ This new mode of production must have put a lot of pressure on the labourers of the southwest. Van de Graaff acknowledged this in his memoir, where he wrote that particularly in the Colombo *dessavony* not too much had been done to improve the paddy culture, because all workers were already involved in the gardens and plantations.¹⁹¹ Thus, the headmen in Galle and Colombo were now held responsible for the production of cinnamon and other cash crops, for the paddy culture and the maintenance of the dykes and canals and lastly for the organization of the labour force.

Just as he had done in Matara in the fall of 1784, three years later Van de Graaff issued a proclamation fixing the juridical responsibilities of the headmen in Colombo from the village level upwards.¹⁹² In June 1789 the governor of Ceylon commenced with the reformation of the *landraad* in which the headmen had always played an important part as members of the board of judges. The aim was to increase the efficiency of the courts and to prevent endless litigation, which obstructed the continuation of

work and was very expensive. At the same time, it meant that Van de Graaff more explicitly than ever integrated the native administrative hierarchy into that of the Company.¹⁹³ Apart from their involvement in the cinnamon plantings, these were not really new tasks, but by fixing their responsibilities in the proclamations the headmen could now be held responsible for it, and could be reproached and even fired if they did not perform well.¹⁹⁴

The proclamations can be seen as a bureaucratic curtailment of the power of the headmen and a rationalization of the relationship between them and the Company, but it also empowered the headmen because they now acted under the aegis of the colonial administration. Governor Van de Graaff clearly strove to extend the Company's reach to the exploitation on the district level and thereby brought the countryside nearer to the Company. He used the existing administrative structure for this, thereby empowering the old elite, but at the same time establishing tighter control over it. The headmen went along with the new system, and did not protest against it. As shall be seen in the next section, one reason for their satisfaction with the stricter administrative rules was that the Dutch government's interests converged with their own. These measures correspond with those undertaken on Java from the mid-eighteenth century and examined in recent studies by Van Niel, Kwee and Ota on respectively Java's North East coast and Bantam. In that sense they are part of a larger pattern, but on Ceylon it was not until Van de Graaff that such measures were introduced.¹⁹⁵

3.8 *Creating enterprising headmen*

The headmen certainly made money out of the new system. The remuneration for the cinnamon has been mentioned already. Moreover, the coconut industry was flourishing and was no longer hampered by the severe laws protecting all the cinnamon trees. In fact, the Company had turned it to its own advantage, by taxing coconut by-products, arrack and coir, and the transport of coconuts.¹⁹⁶ The higher Company officials in Colombo, Galle, and Jaffna received large shares of these taxes as emoluments, which was an additional reason for them to favour the coconut plantations. Michael Roberts sees in this boom in coconut production the major impetus for the rise of members of the Karāva cast as capitalist entrepreneurs.¹⁹⁷ It will be clear by now that this boom was not an autonomous development, but one clearly related to the new Dutch policies which coincidentally stimulated coconut production.

The headmen were stimulated to endeavour in development projects and made use of the coolie labour and the lands for free. Kotelawele, has

suggested that their power and economic position increased much over the eighteenth century, a view confirmed here. According to Kotelawe, the headmen had always suffered from a lack of money to substantiate their personal power over their inferiors.¹⁹⁸ The introduction of money in the rural economy could explain their enthusiasm for the plantation enterprises in particular, because the Company paid them cash for the cinnamon and other trade goods they produced. In that way, the growth of their power was not an independent development or a side effect of the Company's policy, but a direct result of the Dutch government of Ceylon's efforts to monetarize the local economy. The success of the *mudaliyārs* led to a new lifestyle and they spent their money on Dutch-style houses and furniture, which gave them more prestige in the view of their subjects. This all points to an unmatched economic and (material) cultural convergence of the elite of the southwest and the Dutch Company hierarchy and helps explain the British surprise and mistrust of the native headmen in the southwest when they reached Ceylon.¹⁹⁹

In fact, the governor offered not only the native headmen but anyone with sufficient interest and capital the opportunity to endeavour in agricultural undertakings on a scale unheard of before. The *mahāmudaliyār* of the governor's gate Nicolas Dias Abeysinghe and his son Balthasar certainly took the lead in this. In August 1784, the *mahāmudaliyār* signed a contract with the Company that he would attempt to clear and develop the fertile estate Diviture in the northwest of the Galle province. Some investment of the Company was required and he was given five years to make the enterprise profitable and to return the Company's investments. After these five years the Company would decide whether it considered it fruitful to keep the grounds. If not, the grounds were to be given in lease to the *mahāmudaliyār* in question, who would in return cultivate part of it for the Company. It was a large project but if successfully executed it would provide the Company with extra paddy from the lowlands and with cinnamon, pepper, coffee and timber from the highlands. In the first years all went according to plan, and not much was heard of it.²⁰⁰

In 1788, Mattheus Petrus Raket (son of Bartholomeus Raket, commander of Jaffna) and P.W. van Schuler were commissioned to investigate the development of the estate. They concluded that progress was hampered by the lack of enthusiasm for the project on the part of the commander of Galle, Dyonisius Kraaijenhoff. He replied immediately with an extensive letter to the governor in which he argued that it was not his fault, but that of the *mahāmudaliyār* Nicolas Dias Abeysinghe and his son Balthasar. He pointed out that the commissioners had been misled by the natives, who, in fear of the *mahāmudaliyār* and his son, had only spoken in ways that would show them in a good light. He pointed at Abeysinghes' mismanagement, their intrigues against other native headmen

and their rough treatment of the inhabitants. After Kraaijenhoff's departure the same year, Pieter Sluijsken took over the position of commander of Galle and complained to the government on the same grounds. He wanted a new commission to control the affairs on the estate and Batavia finally commissioned him to do so himself in 1790; but he failed to complete this assignment before he departed for Surat in 1792. By then, Diederich Thomas Fretz, the new commander, investigated the matter and came to the conclusion that the *mahāmudaliyār* had done his work properly, that there were certain problems in the estate concerning flooding, but these were beyond his power and needed to be managed on a larger scale.²⁰¹

The Abeysinghes had attracted a group of roaming and impoverished people from the lower castes of blacksmiths, coalburners and *oeliassen* to settle on the estate and when the contract with the Company ended, he proposed that these people should reside directly under himself for the next ten years. Apparently the *mahāmudaliyār* felt that he had a right to these people because he had given them land to live on and to till. This is difficult to prove, but such client relations between headmen and peasants must have existed on a much larger scale. Here the people had tied themselves to the Abeysinghes because they had given them a place to settle on the newly cleared estate of Diviture, but in other cases debt bondage could have played a role in such alliances.²⁰² This autonomous patron-client relationship with the peasants was something over which the Company had no direct control and was one of the major reasons why the Company officials could not do without the headmen, both in their official and private capacities.²⁰³

3.9 Centralization of power: competition and cooperation

Changes in the Company's inland policy had a variety of repercussions for Company servants. A good example is found in the Diviture case mentioned above. What is interesting about the complaints of Kraaijenhof and Sluijsken is that they clearly felt that their power was threatened by the *mahāmudaliyār*. Kraaijenhof explicitly stated that he felt humiliated by the governor because he thought he was being put on the same level as these native headmen over whom he had no power.²⁰⁴ Moreover, through the *mahāmudaliyār*, the governor was extending his authority over the native department of Galle *corle* and the Matara *dessavony*, against the will of the commander in Galle because it seriously affected his personal authority.

The new agricultural policies were more directly to the advantage of the headmen than to that of the local Company officials. In addition,

while the tasks of the commanders were not particularly related to the inland policies, the *dessavas* and lieutenant *dessavas* were actually directly involved in the development of the interior. In the end, the governor's preference for direct contact with these inland administrators caused repeated problems with the commanders who felt superceded. The authority of the commanders was also affected in another way. Following his experiment in Galle, Van de Graaff issued an island-wide decree in 1785 forbidding the taking of *paresses*.²⁰⁵ This time, the *plakkaat* was aimed not only at the native headmen, but also at the Company officials who traditionally received gifts from the headmen upon their appointment. This measure led to a considerable decrease in income and also negatively affected the status of the *dessavas* and the commanders, for in a symbolic way these gifts had functioned as a confirmation of their place in the existing hierarchy.²⁰⁶

Instead of the payment of *paresses* the headmen were forced to cultivate part of the grounds, in relation to their post, with such market crops as cinnamon, coffee, areca nut, teak and sappanwood. Van de Graaff expected much from this and it was his intention to expand this policy further, and to replace the labour services with such forced cultivation as he had done with the cinnamon peelers.²⁰⁷ It was a way to get better in control over agricultural production and make more efficient use of labour.

On the other hand, the governor tried to stimulate Company officials to get more involved in the agricultural development of the island themselves. This was done through commissions and emoluments in the form of a share in the revenue from the government's plantations. The produce of the coconuts also became an important revenue for the Company administrators, and most of the coir fell into the hands of the commanders in this way. But Van de Graaff went even further by announcing in 1789 that the *dessavas* would receive fifty percent of the increase in revenue of the paddy tax above the 15-year average. In this way he hoped that the *dessavas* would try harder to promote the cultivation of paddy and would put more effort into its supervision. In general, many Company officials, civil and military, brought land under cultivation with the intention of selling it to the Company afterwards.²⁰⁸

Cash-crop cultivation also demanded more intense supervision to ensure that this carried on lands adequate for the task. This was too much work for the *dessavas* and Van de Graaff requested that Batavia appoint lieutenant *dessavas* as they had in earlier times. But the High Government refused because it was deemed too costly. In the end, Van de Graaff appointed Luitenant Mitman as overseer of the plantations against the will of Batavia. Yet it was not uncommon to invest military commanders with civil duties: in outposts like Trincomalee and Kalpitiya military and civil functions were often combined. On Ceylon Van de Graaff reasoned

that the military was stationed on the island and paid for by the VOC anyway, so why not make full use of their capabilities.²⁰⁹

The appropriation of military men for civil duties such as land surveyors also occurred in the engineering department. The Company had always had a military engineer and mapmakers in service for the maintenance of the forts on the island. However, Van de Graaff decided to use their services for surveying gardens and plantations and for the maintenance and expansion of waterworks all over the island. He had new recruits specially trained in this work. In the 1780s and 1790s, men like Captain engineer Pieter Samuel Foenander and the accountant Johannes Wahlberg, and in the end the young recruit Schneider, worked hard on the development of plans for irrigation and canals. The most famous is Foenander's plan for the Giant's tank near Mannar, which brings us to yet another part of Van de Graaff's inland policy, namely the agricultural projects in the periphery; these are discussed more extensively in Chapter Five.²¹⁰

Not all Company officials were charmed by the governor's schemes and some did not cooperate. Therefore, Van de Graaff tried to place in crucial posts officials who saw the advantage of agricultural development and who were loyal to him. In Matara, Christiaan van Angelbeek, son of Johan Gerard van Angelbeek and a cousin of Van de Graaff, was appointed *dessava* in 1786. In the spirit of Van de Graaff, he commenced with new clearances and the digging of new canals in the Magampattu, the eastern part of the Matara *dessavony*. Although as commander of Galle Sluijsken was officially superior to Christiaan van Angelbeek in the ruling hierarchy, he was passed over in the organization of this enterprise. When in 1790 a rebellion broke out in the Matara region, this gave way to another battle of words between the governor and Pieter Sluijsken.

On 18 April 1790, Christiaan van Angelbeek wrote Sluijsken that he had just learned the previous day that mobs from the Matara *dessavony* had started marching through the countryside en route for Matara. The direct cause was that their headmen were forcing them to work on the canal in the Magampattu, on orders of Van Angelbeek, while they already had to toil on the cinnamon plantations of Governor Van de Graaff, Van Angelbeek and some of the *mudaliyārs* and other headmen. They complained that they "would not even have time to enjoy in peace the blessings that had overcome them by the flourishing of their fields".²¹¹

Van Angelbeek wrote to Sluijsken that the headmen had asked for a committee consisting of members of the political council of Colombo to investigate the complaints. Sluijsken instead decided to send a committee directly from Galle to the mob to "discover the true origin of their dissatisfaction and promise them justice and protection from the government".²¹² What followed was an intense argument between Van Angel-

beek and Sluijsken about the authority of this committee: Sluijsken was of the opinion that Matara fell under his responsibility and therefore he was competent to authorise such a committee, while a committee sent straight from Colombo undermined his authority. In the end, two committees investigated the matter and produced extensive reports on the rebellion. Van Angelbeek was temporarily replaced, but rehabilitated by the end of the year. The whole episode left an enormous amount of source material in the form of the reports of the two committees, Sluijsken's accusations and Van Angelbeek's defence.²¹³

Nonetheless it is difficult to assess the exact reason for the rebellion, which was likely a combination of factors. Clearly the most important was the high pressure that the government placed on the labourers. But this could not have been the sole cause for in previous years the labourers had worked on the canals and gardens. In the first reports they emphasized that they expected a good crop which made it unnecessary for them to work for the Company. In bad years the rations of rice and small payments they earned for the *corvée* work compensated for the bad crops. Jealousies among the headmen with regards to their rivals' successful cinnamon plantations or their close cooperation with Van Angelbeek may also have played a role. The rebellion did not spread beyond Matara and was suppressed by the end of the month, but the arguments between Sluijsken and Van Angelbeek continued. Significantly, the pattern of the rebellion reveals some of the private patronage relations between Company officials like Van Angelbeek and Sluijsken and the native headmen.²¹⁴ It shows that interests other than the Company's were at stake. This brings us to the very complex relationships between the private and official interests of native headmen and Company officials. Such shared interests had probably always been there, but the new policies of Van de Graaff apparently caused new tension in these relationships.

3.10 *Company servants and native elites: joint ventures*

In 1809, the British Governor Thomas Maitland complained in one of his dispatches about the power of the native headmen. He saw in the private co-operation between headmen and VOC officials the major cause of their uncontrollable power: "In the Dutch government, this evil principally arose from the small pay allowed to their various servants, which, forcing them to gain their existence by indirect means, ever left them in the hands and at the mercy of the modeliers."²¹⁵ Indeed, many Dutch officials were involved in private businesses with the headmen, but the relationship was more complex than Maitland assumes here.

The official sources do not provide us with much information regard-

ing these private businesses, but one instance where they do is a list with statements of the incomes of all the Company's officials that was sent from Colombo to Batavia in 1789. In the statement of his income as *dessava* of Colombo, Fretz complained that the High Government of Batavia had disapproved of its personnel on Ceylon being involved in different plantations. A despatch of 31 July 1787, noted that "if he [the *dessava*] will execute his duties as required, this should provide him with enough work and joy, so that he does not have to occupy himself with large enterprises in addition".²¹⁶ Fretz complained that the income of a *dessava* was small, and because he could be provided with cheap labour, he had started a plantation growing cinnamon, areca nut, pepper, coffee, teak and sappanwood. He wrote that it was easily done and did not cost him much time and certainly did not hinder him in his work as *dessava*. How did Fretz find the cheap labour and the time to oversee the plantations? It is likely that he worked together with some native headmen who provided him with the labourers and overseers of the plantations and shared in the profits.

We find many examples of Dutch officials who had started plantations like Fretz. One of the bigger entrepreneurs in this respect was that of Count von Ranzow.²¹⁷ The plantations were usually made on Company ground, but they were seen as projects that benefited the Company, and in fact the officials were usually paid back their investments by the Company upon departure. The cheap labour was found through the headmen, and this means that because the Dutch were actually dependent on the headmen for their profits, it was in their private interest that the headmen kept their power over the people. Probably this is what Maitland meant with his remark quoted at the beginning of this section.²¹⁸

Such relationships also existed in the trade sector. Anthony Bertolacci, who worked under Governors North and Maitland, describes how the higher echelons of the Dutch were in possession of most of the capital in the southwest, and that they had agents who took care of their trade. Dutch capital was further increased by lending money, which probably also led to client-patron relationships between them and native entrepreneurs.²¹⁹ The question of private trade remains vague: whereas we do find remarks relating to the plantations in official Company sources, remarks on private trade are few. At least one case that corroborates the suggestions of Bertolacci is that of Pieter Sluijsken. We have already seen that he quarrelled with Van de Graaff almost from the start of his governorship. In his many private writings to the authorities in Batavia, he unintentionally gives us some insight into his private affairs. For example, it turns out that his business in Galle was headed by a native of the name Simon de Zilva with whom he had an account of not less than 40,000 rixdollars.²²⁰

The phenomenon of coastal inhabitants working as agents for the Company's officials is reminiscent of the *dubashes* or native middlemen who worked for the British in Madras.²²¹ Working together with the Dutch merchants would have given them the opportunity to accumulate capital and eventually to conduct their own private businesses independently. Bertolacci informs us that after the British take-over, the native agents of the Dutch assumed control of the coastal trade in the southwest which had previously been in Dutch hands.²²² In an excellent study on the rise of the Karāva elites as capitalist entrepreneurs in the course of the nineteenth century, Michael Roberts considers the rise in arrack production and trade as a major accelerator in this development. Perhaps their rise should also be related to the increasing private trade of the Dutch during the eighteenth century and their role as agents for the Dutch.²²³

The Karāvas and other coastal inhabitants worked not only with the Dutch but apparently also with the very wealthy native headmen of the interior. After the death of Nicolas Dias Abeysinghe, his will was executed by five men: two were his sons, one was a *mudaliyār*, one a free merchant of the name Philip Simon de Waas, and the fifth a fisherman (Karāva) named Renaldus de Andrado.²²⁴ It is tempting to see in this a development like that described by Bertolacci, could it be that the Dutch were already loosing ground to the natives in their private trade prior to the British take over? It is difficult to say whether such scanty evidence points at such a development. If it does, this helps explain the increased tension among the Company's officials themselves. As long as the Dutch were the only ones with the capital, they were the key figures in the trading networks. Now that Van de Graaff was prodding the headmen to establish plantations and remunerating them for it at the expense of the Dutch, they could strengthen their own economic power base. They excelled the Dutch as attractive business partners, because of their autonomous power over the people and their access to labour. This was perhaps what caused Sluijsken's frustration. Of course such conclusions must remain rather tentative, and require more research even if the scarce documentation of the private affairs of the Dutch may prevent it. How far this should be seen as an intended or unintended side effect of Van de Graaff's policies is also unclear. If anything, the evidence at least shows that Van de Graaff's policies caused an expansion of trading activities among various groups of the island's inhabitants when formerly these had been limited to the *Chetty* and Moor communities.

3.11 *Increased efficiency, land and capitation tax*

The development of agriculture could only be of use to the Company if

the produce was properly taxed. As commander of Galle, Van de Graaff attempted to increase the income by attending to the mode of taxation. It has been pointed out already that in most regions taxes were farmed out to the highest bidder. In the southwest the taxes on the produce of the coconut – arrack and coir in particular – yielded much for the Company though mostly as emoluments for the officials, while traditionally the custom duties accounted for a large income in Jaffna. However, the collection of the taxes on the land was still left to the headmen, except in Jaffna, where the government appointed *recibidors*, native collectors, to perform this task. Van de Graaff decided to change the situation in the southwest, and expected much from farming the land tax. He had new conditions drawn up for farming the paddy tax, and it is clear that he hoped the tax farmers would see an interest in promoting paddy production.²²⁵

It is not entirely clear what the effect was, because in practice, many headmen became tax farmers. However, some of the coastal inhabitants, burghers, Moors, and *Chetties*, also got involved in the paddy collection. This was a new development because they had so far limited themselves to trade and only taken tax farms related to trade. The practice of tax farming is closely related to the growth of entrepreneurship and the increase in capital among native groups discussed above. Despatches from Colombo provide us with yearly lists of renters and research into the origin of these renters over a longer period could perhaps give better insight into the social mobility and growth of capital of certain groups of people. Although it has always to be kept in mind that Company officials also made investments in the tax farms through middlemen (for officially they were not allowed to do this), how widespread this practice was is unclear.²²⁶

Searching for extra resources, in 1784 Van de Graaff also turned to the Moors in the Galle *corle* and had a new registry made of them to make sure that they were properly taxed either through service or through a yearly payment of 12 rixdollars.²²⁷ Later he did the same in Putulam and Negombo, and in 1787 he had a general registry made of all foreigners living in Colombo, who were liable to perform similar duties or pay tax.²²⁸ In this regard, Van de Graaff did not exactly create new resources, but he did increase the efficiency of the existing systems. In some areas like Batticaloa, the Company tried to tax people who had so far not been liable to perform services nor payed taxes.²²⁹ Everybody living in the Dutch part of the island had to be made useful to the Company. Of course, the *tombos* or head- and land-registrations that were begun in the 1740s also formed part of this striving for increased efficiency, and they were continuously brought up to date, particularly in Galle and Jaffna. A new land registration campaign started in Jaffna in 1780 and between 1787 and 1790 a head *tombo* was written up.²³⁰ As always, the *tombo*

registrations were liable to mistakes and frauds through bribery and evasion. This counted in particular for the last head *tombo* drawn up in Jaffna which showed numerous faults. Further complaints relating to the bad management of the commander and the *dessava* added to this and resulted in a committee being sent to Jaffna to investigate the matter in 1794.²³¹

3.12 Troubles in Jaffna

Van de Graaff encountered a lot of difficulties in Jaffna in his campaign to increase the efficiency in taxation. Revenues there had traditionally been high due to the many trading activities and farming out the taxes formed a lucrative business for the Company and the commander personally. This gave rise to some rich tax farmers and traders like the *mudaliyār* Ritna Singa and the *Chetty* Waitelinge. In 1785 the rents of Ritna Singa were as high as 50,000 rixdollars, which was more than half of the total of the rents.²³² Even before Van de Graaff came to power, Bartholomeus Raket had been in charge of the district, and Van de Graaff did not interfere much with his administration. He did however infringe on Raket's power in two cases.

First, he decided to auction the tax farms of Jaffna simultaneously in Colombo, and the highest bid would get the farm. In the previous year he had been disappointed by the low bids from Jaffna, and hoped to secure a higher income from the lucrative tax farms in this way.²³³ Second, he took away the commander of Jaffna's authority over the affairs in the Vanni. He had done the same thing in Matara, but in Jaffna he was more direct.²³⁴ Still, it was felt in Colombo that Jaffna was not yielding as much revenue as it could and that in general Jaffna was a neglected region. Van de Graaff and Bartolomeus Raket did not get along very well, as is clear from a few of Raket's private letters that have survived. Like Sluijsken, Raket felt threatened by Van de Graaff's centralizing efforts which he saw as an interference in his business as commander of Jaffna and as a limitation of his local authority.²³⁵

In the early nineties, more and more complaints were reaching Colombo about the behaviour of the members of the Council of Jaffna, and Raket in particular. Early in 1794, a committee led by Nagel, Ebell, and Mooijaart was sent to Jaffna to look into the complaints of the inhabitants regarding the *tombo* registry, which had been written up to the preference of certain headmen. The committee also inquired into the tax practices and especially whether the taxes could best be farmed out separately or in groups. The committee's inquiry brought many frauds to light.²³⁶

Raket was supposed to have taken large bribes for the appointments of

headmen, which went contrary to the governor's policy. Moreover, he was supposed to have committed frauds with the bazaar taxes.²³⁷ Raket had already retired, but defended himself in writing. In his private letters to his cousin Moens in Coromandel, he expressed his frustrations about Van de Graaff's government and his new policies. Moens and Raket agreed that it was best if Jaffna was governed "by simple souls in the old manner".²³⁸ His departure gave space to a more thorough investigation into the local affairs in Jaffna, and Jacob Burnand and Martinus Mekern were sent there in the fall of 1794, not only to investigate but also to give advice on how to improve finances. They were still occupied with their investigation when the British arrived in Trincomalee in July 1795 and their work was seriously hampered by the subsequent British advance to Jaffna, as villagers fled for the British army. Despite this, their research resulted in an extensive report concerning the frauds of Raket and his inferiors. In addition, Mekern wrote some recommendations for the proper future management of the town of Jaffnapatnam and the *dessavony*. The recommendations were critically read by Johan Gerard van Angelbeek, the new governor, who was anxious to increase the income from this neglected district.

Van Angelbeek and his advisors did not agree on all points recommended for change and improvement.²³⁹ Two points are of particular interest. Mekern wished to free from the capitation tax the lowest order of people, the *Nalluas* and *Palluas*, who formed the slave caste and were bound as serfs to a master. Secondly, Mekern thought that a tax on coconut trees, which then applied to two particular villages, could be extended all over the *dessavony*, to replace the tax on coconut oil. Van Angelbeek strongly opposed these two plans on the grounds that the only way to tax the *Nalluas* and *Palluas* was through capitation taxes, since they did not own anything taxable, but lived on the grounds of their master. Van Angelbeek declined to tax coconut trees because it was such a basic crop and he anticipated a lot of resistance from the populace. Mekern and Van Angelbeek did agree that the paddy taxes should not be farmed out, but left to the native administrative functionaries, the *recibidors*, as had always been the case. The discussion was still going on when Jaffna was conquered by the British.²⁴⁰

3.13 Conclusion

As was pointed out in the historiographic introduction of the thesis, the real transition to colonial rule in Sri Lanka is usually taken to have occurred only after the transition of power from Dutch to British hands. I argue that the transition on Sri Lanka took place gradually and found

its origin in the first half of the eighteenth century.²⁴¹ Moreover, I find that from the 1780s onwards this development was accelerated by two factors. First was the cultivation of cinnamon in the plantations of the Company and private gardens. This was an important new development, for cinnamon had always been collected in the wild and after a period of experimentation from about 1767, its production was now brought under Company's control. Second were the increased government expenses for rice. At the time, the VOC was in decline and supplies of basic foodstuffs like rice for its garrisons arrived less regularly on the island than they had before. Exacerbating this problem, the labour force on the new cinnamon plantations required additional supplies of rice. One way to deal with the mounting expenses was to increase the efficiency of the revenue departments and Van de Graaff managed to improve the revenue of the colony by fifty percent.

In addition, Van de Graaff also decided that Ceylon should be self sufficient in its rice production. To meet this end, he shifted his attention to the peripheral regions of the island, like the east coast, the Vanni and Manaar regions, brought them under tight control and invested in the irrigation and the clearance of new grounds.²⁴² It was his plan to turn these regions into a *broodkamer* or breadbasket for the rest of the island. In the traditional centre of Dutch power, the southwest, waste land was given out on contracts forcing the tenants to cultivate part of their lands for the Company with cinnamon or other commercial crops. As a result, the private interests of Dutch officials and native headmen converged in the establishment of cinnamon plantations, the growth of other commercial crops and mercantile enterprises. It seems that in these business relations the native headmen gained the upper-hand over lesser Dutch officials because of their capital accumulation and their access to the labour force.

In this period, the government of the island became more centralized and the relationship of the VOC with the native headmen who acted as middlemen between colonial authorities and native society became tighter and better defined. In the southwest, the original systems of indirect rule was transformed into a more direct type of government, in which the native headmen had well defined assignments and were held accountable for their performance. This entailed the development of a new political culture in which the traditional means of confirming the administrative hierarchy in the form of *paresses* (gift-giving) were abandoned. At the same time the native headmen were further empowered by their new tasks and their commercial engagements. Paradoxically, while the bargaining position of the headmen was strengthened, the colonial administration became more hands-on because of growing Dutch interference and control.