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

Schrikker, A.F.

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CHAPTER FOUR

INLAND EXPLOITATION:
THE DISCOVERY OF THE PERIPHERY4.1 “Broodkamer” *ideology*

So far, the focus has been on the administrative adjustments made by the governor to improve the agriculture and revenue in the core areas, Colombo, Galle and Jaffna. The emphasis in these regions lay on the production of cashcrops, with cinnamon being the first and foremost. However the demand for rice to feed the troops and the coolies remained a pressing subject and paddy cultivation was high on Van de Graaff's agenda.²⁴³ The rice was meant not only for the garrison, but also for the cinnamon department and coolies in general: the more work to be done, the more rice was needed. Around four thousand *lasten* of rice a year were needed to sustain the labour force, but the Dutch could not even get half of that from their possessions on the island. In 1784/85, the Dutch regions of Ceylon yielded 1,798 *lasten* of rice for government, the year after it was about 1,500 *lasten* and most of it came from Matara and Jaffna. For example, Batticaloa did not produce more than eighty-seven *lasten* for the Company.²⁴⁴ Batavia could not furnish Ceylon with as much rice as it had, but still yearly requests were made to Batavia for supplies of at least eight hundred *lasten* of rice, and the expensive contracts with the South Indian traders accounted for the rest.

The high expenses involved in the acquisition of rice convinced Van de Graaff that the island should really become self-sufficient in its food crop production. This idea had been proposed earlier by Van Goens and Van Imhoff, but it was Van de Graaff who made a concerted effort in this direction. With the cinnamon plantations blooming in the southwest, he moved his attention to the peripheral Dutch possessions on the island. It was his intention to turn these regions into a *broodkamer* or breadbasket, for the rest of the island. The areas to the east of Matara, which had become Dutch after 1766, and to the interior of Batticaloa, were now actively reclaimed. The same was true of the Vanni district where the local chiefs, the *vanniyaṛs*, who had governed their lands in relative independence, were removed and the Dutch Lieutenant Thomas Nagel took up the task of improving agriculture. Here and there, in the Magampattu bordering Matara *dessavony* and the Panoa in Batticaloa, Van de Graaff even extended Dutch authority into Kandyan lands.

The measures taken by Van de Graaff varied greatly. For example he made the headmen promote the technique of transplanting paddy instead of seeding, because in this way the plants yielded more grain and less was wasted for the seeds.²⁴⁵ Another plan of Van de Graaff related to the planting of manioc or cassava. He thought that if inhabitants grew manioc for their basic food consumption, this would not only prevent famines, but they would also consume less paddy allowing them to sell the surplus to the Company. He enthusiastically sent the manioc plants around to all stations, with instructions on how to grow it, but the inhabitants were not easily converted to this new foodstuff and the plan was a failure.²⁴⁶ He also intended to colonize the sparsely inhabited regions of the island with migrants from South India, Indonesia, or China. With the exception of a group of *sipahis* settling in the Panoa, these operations did not succeed either.²⁴⁷

Other plans regarded irrigation and waterworks on the island. Great expectations were set on the Giant's tank close to Mannar. However financing its repair was difficult to arrange because Batavia refused to invest in such a large and expensive project. Van de Graaff hoped that he could get around this with private investment, but did not succeed in raising enough money. Similar plans were made for the Kantelai tank near Trincomalee, but never put into effect despite all the preliminary work put into the investigations by the engineers and the officials of Mannar and Trincomalee.²⁴⁸ We have already seen that in the Matara *dessavony* some undertakings were started with great zeal by the *dessava* Christiaan van Angelbeek. There the problem was not so much the preservation of water, but rather the drainage of surplus water that caused flooding in the rainy season. Several canals were dug for this purpose in the Gangebaddepattu and the Magampattu, but not all were finished by the arrival of the British. Moreover the work in Matara was hampered by the rebellion of 1790, which made Van de Graaff and his successor more prudent in undertaking these large projects.

The rebellion in Matara has been discussed briefly in the context of the private power struggles among Company officials. It was pointed out that the headmen played a role in this as well; those who were losing out on the new projects were especially against it. But from the first reports about the rebellion it is clear that the inhabitants themselves objected to working on the canal as coolies (as they had done in the previous years) because they expected a good crop and did not want to spend their time working for the Company or the headmen. They were afraid to be pressed into their work by the headmen on the order of the *dessava* Christiaan van Angelbeek. Although the work on the canal was heavy and they were most likely not well-treated, they had not rebelled against it previously, and it is probable that in times of bad harvest work on the canal at least

provided them with basic provisions of rice and a little money that enabled them to feed their families.

What is of interest here is that in good times the inhabitants could not see any advantage in working on the canal even though it could in the end also be of advantage to them, because it aimed to prevent floods in the rainy season.²⁴⁹ The rebellion in Matara is an example of how colonial intervention led to a clash of mentality between the Dutch and the native population that was not easily overcome. This was even more the case in regions where contact between the natives and the Company had been rare, like in the Vanni, Trincomalee, and Batticaloa. This chapter discusses these new encounters and colonial interventions in the periphery, through an analysis of the reports and memoranda written by Jacques Fabrice van Senden, Thomas Nagel, and Jacob Burnand on their operations in these districts.

*4.2 New encounters in the periphery: a journey around Trincomalee*²⁵⁰

The “discovery” of the periphery led to new encounters between the native population and the Dutch officials. These did not always go smoothly and it was not an easy task to implement the same energetic policies in these regions as had been done in the core. The diary of the exploratory journey that Van Senden, head of Trincomalee, undertook in the spring of 1786, gives insight into this interaction and how both the Dutch and the natives experienced this new encounter.²⁵¹ It also reveals the utilitarian attitude of the Dutch regarding the nature and people of Ceylon, and it went hand in hand with the discovery of the island’s rich past in this northeastern dry zone. Moreover it very clearly reveals the clash of interests between the natives and the Dutch and their different perceptions of their environment.

Van Senden’s journal consists of four parts. The first part, about his journey through Kottiyar, is the most extensive. This is followed by an account of the possible measures to be taken to improve the agriculture there. The third and fourth part, about Tamblegam and Kattukolom, are much shorter. In those sections, Van Senden refers often to earlier remarks he made about Kottiyar, which was connected to Kattukolom by the bay of Trincomalee; Tamblegam was located more inland, and bordered the territories of the Kingdom of Kandy. The land on the coast is by and large flat, but in the interior the landscape is more diverse with plains and hilly areas. Salt production on the coast of Kattukolom formed an important industry for the region. The salt was mainly purchased by traders from Kandy and by the VOC in Trincomalee. The hinterland of

Trincomalee was densely populated and had an impressive past. Van Senden describes with great interest the remains of temples, bridges and irrigation works of the ancient kingdoms that he saw on his travels. The most impressive ruin of all was that of the water tank of Kantelai in Tamblegam.

Van Senden travelled by boat, horse and palanquin and had himself accompanied by the most prominent native headmen of the area. In Kottiyar he was assisted by the *vanniyār* Irroemarooewentoega Ideewirasinga Nallemapane, in Tamblegam by the *mudaliyār* Don Fransisco Kannegerandge Kannegeritna and in Kattukolompattu by the *vanniyār* Don Joan Sandere Seegere Mapane Wangenaar.²⁵² The local population took care of provisioning the group. The first thing Van Senden did when arriving in the villages was to make up a register of all male inhabitants. The villages on the coast numbered up to a hundred men, but the other settlements were much smaller, with only seven or eight adult men. In some places, in particular in Tamblegam and Kattukolom, it was impossible to count the inhabitants, because they fled.

Van Senden's visit to Moedoer, the first village he called at, may serve as an example of his encounters.²⁵³ The village was relatively large, with one hundred fourteen adult males, and was located on the coast at the mouth of the river Kinge. The first thing Van Senden noticed was that there was a lot of waste land. The paddy fields that were in use looked fine, but the water tank that had to supply the land in the dry season was not well placed. It lay too low and as a consequence the water could not reach the fields. He therefore showed the people how they could water the fields using dam and pipe-constructions, so they could also exploit the waste lands. He inspected the river and wondered whether a water mill could be placed there to saw timber. Next he checked whether the river could be diked to prevent floods in the wet season. He explained the inhabitant that the higher grounds, which were not used at all, were perfectly suited to growing fruit bearing trees. He thought of plantations of between three thousand and twenty-two thousand coconut palms. Van Senden did not understand why the inhabitants did not put effort into producing more; they could barter the surplus and the population would increase and this in turn would lead to higher production.

The unsown paddyfields, water regulation and the poor fruit tree plantations are subjects that recur again and again in the text. Many times Van Senden pointed this out to the *vanniyār* who travelled with him, and encouraged him "to make better use of that which nature had given him and his people so generously".²⁵⁴ He saw everything in terms of exploitation: the rivers were waterways or energy providers, the land was meant to be used as paddyfield or plantation, and the river clay waited to be used

for the production of bricks and tiles. Wild buffalo were suitable draught animals for tilling the soil, wild elephants could be caught and traded with India. Van Senden even tried to transmit his own technological knowledge to the inhabitants, in the case of the dam-and-pipe construction in Moedoer.²⁵⁵

Van Senden's utilitarian attitude towards nature emerges frequently, and he is almost as often disappointed with the state of the agriculture and the commitment of the inhabitants. Sometimes he was pleasantly surprised though, for example when he visited the village Pattianoette, with only thirteen inhabitants, on Saturday 10 June: "There is a little pagoda here which has nothing special, except for the brahmin priest, who loves planting and has planted part of the empty space that usually adjoins the pagodas, with lime trees and other fruit-bearing trees."²⁵⁶ Van Senden liked this so much, that he promised the man seeds and pits of other fruit trees to extend his orchard.

Van Senden did not pay attention only to agriculture. He was also interested in the roads and rivers. Here he was confronted with the limitations that nature forced upon people and he complained much about it. Because of the heat, he could only travel early in the morning or late in the afternoon, and sometimes he even travelled at night. The rivers turned out to be unnavigable because the riverbeds had run dry, or had grown thick with mangrove forest. Paths to specific destinations often turned out to be impassable and "made for no one but forest people".²⁵⁷ Elephants occasionally formed an obstacle when he travelled through Tamblegam: in large numbers they obstructed the road and terrified his retinue.²⁵⁸ The elephants could only be scared away by gun shots. Above all this, van Senden was feeling ill during his whole journey. He could sometimes barely feel his fingers and sometimes his nerves troubled him so much that could not continue the journey.²⁵⁹ In Kottiyar and Tamblegam in particular he suffered much from mosquitoes at night.

Despite everything, Van Senden often expressed his admiration for the natural environment. On the plain close to the village of Kooijkoederipie settlements were built on small hills and the plain was used for paddy culture:

all these islands or raisings are covered with coconut palms like feathers and the pattern of light green of the fields that have not been reaped yet, and the hayish-yellow of those that have already completed the reaping, and the dark green of the trees, shows us one of those spectacles which convinces us, like with everything, of the supremacy of nature above art.²⁶⁰

It is typical of Van Senden's attitude that he uses the word nature when he is talking not about a wild jungle, but about a landscape that has been brought into cultivation.

4.3 *Clash of cultures: useful versus threatening nature*

The interesting thing about the travel journal is that Van Senden wrote down not only his own observations, but also the inhabitants's responses to his suggestions. When Van Senden proposed in the village of Moedoer that everyone should produce more than they needed for themselves, he was told that "Through the outbreak of diarrocha and children's diseases for some years now, the country had become depopulated [...] and each of the few remaining people do not cultivate more than what they need in one year."²⁶¹ From the villagers' answers to his suggestions, it becomes clear that their existence was very insecure because of certain natural factors. Therefore they could not see the point of expanding agricultural output. The region was plagued by wild animals, and hordes of wild elephants in particular who damaged the fields and panthers and bears who prowled about the district. The climate often worked against them: in the rainy season floods could ruin the crop, but long periods of drought also had damaging effects. Finally, in the previous period many people had died from disease. Remarkably enough, Van Senden did not recognize this problem; apparently the people must have looked healthy at the moment he travelled there.²⁶²

Apart from all this, Van Senden met a lot of distrust from the inhabitants with regard to himself as a white representative of the Dutch government. Sometimes the inhabitants fled when they were informed of his approach. They feared he would be taken as slaves, or being eaten by his Malay soldiers. Van Senden thought this nonsense and tried to convince them of his good intentions by explaining the purpose of his trip and by offering useful instruction, giving them extra sowing seed and promising them postponement of taxes. Still, it did not always work, as the example of his meeting with the men of Elendetorre shows. There, Van Senden explained how fruit-bearing trees were best planted. He subsequently asked the inhabitants whether they would start planting trees straight away, if he would provide them with seeds or offshoot:

After murmuring for some time, an ancient man, who could not have much hope of enjoying those fruits, came forward, and said with a smiling face: "why would we go into all this trouble, our grandfathers and fathers never did it." This was agreed upon by all the attendants.²⁶³

According to Van Senden this inertia was the inhabitants' most evil quality and had to change.

Van Senden portrayed the native inhabitants not only as inert, but also as simple and angst-ridden. These characteristics came to the fore most strongly in the folk tales he collected. Van Senden was mainly interested in stories related to the prominent ruins he encountered. In Tamblegam for example he passed a river with a few standing pillars in the middle.

The local people believed that these had been placed there by a mythical washerwoman. This woman appears again and again in the local accounts explaining the origin of the large ruins.²⁶⁴ Van Senden concluded however that the pillars would have been part of a bridge, of which the upper part was gone.

Although Van Senden was sometimes a little scornful of the folk stories, his interest in them was sincere. Most attention was paid to the stories that related to the ancient watertank of Kantelai. The people turned out very fearful for the water tank.

[...] in the morning at four forty I left Kooij Koederieppoe for the infamous, and never mentioned without fright by the Mallabars, Kantelai tank. They tried everything to prevent me from going; warnings, admonitions and the worst: citing the many examples, which I knew were true, of curious people, who died shortly after the visit or never recovered from lingering diseases, but nothing helped; the usefulness of the Kantelai tank, for the agriculture of the province Tamblegammoo was too important for me not to see it with my own eyes—for the notorious devil Poedem, who had made the facing of the tank in six days as servant of the King Kollekooten and still guards it, I had no fear, but I dreaded the poultice and cooked mess of the superstitious [...].²⁶⁵

In deference to the strong aversion of the people, he decided to ask the “heathen priest” for permission beforehand. He explained to the inhabitants that he took their warnings seriously, but that he wished to behold himself the structure “that I thought was made by humans, though they attributed it to spirits”. He would however behave respectfully and hoped that the inhabitants would join him in seeing it.²⁶⁶

Despite all warnings Van Senden visited the tank and was clearly much impressed by the enormous construction. Moreover, he showed his companions that the irrigation tank could be made ready for use through a few minor operations like taking away the mud in the pipes. He ordered the headmen who had joined him that in future the tank had to be cleaned in the dry season by all the inhabitants together. Those who did not cooperate would not be allowed to make use of the water for the irrigation of their fields.²⁶⁷

The section on the Kantelai tank is essential to understanding the differences in outlook between Van Senden and the inhabitants. Van Senden depicts himself as the all-knowing, rational European, in sharp contrast with the primitive and superstitious indigenous population. The fact that the inhabitants attributed a structure like the watertank of Kantelai to devils revealed their fearful and primitive nature and their incapacity to control nature and adapt it to their needs. The remains of temples, bridges and, water tanks did however point at a higher civilization and more intensive use of the land in the past, and a higher population density. This rich past appealed to Van Senden’s imagination and strength-

ened his belief that the region could turn prosperous once more. It is no coincidence that in his scheme for improvement, he laid great emphasis on the ancient civilization of the inhabitants.

4.4 *Civilization as universal remedy*

Apart from the suggestions for improvement of agriculture made on the spot, Van Senden also formulated a more general plan for the exploitation of the land. He was of the opinion that three factors could contribute to its improvement. In the first place, the region had to become more densely populated again. He thought that under certain conditions the Company might attract South Indians, Malay soldiers after they resigned service or even Chinese to settle in the region. But basically, he was of the opinion that the inhabitants had to produce more children, for this would give them more economic security.

This point relates to the second and third factors. Van Senden felt on the one hand that people had to make an effort to become more active and enterprising. On the other hand he believed that the Company had to invest in tools and seeds for every village and that the Company should not raise taxes for a few years in order to give the people a chance to substantially increase the agricultural output. Finally he thought it would be best if every province had a European superintendent. This was impossible to arrange from one day to the other, not only because the Company did not have the funds for it, but also because of the people's fear of white men. Moreover in the case of Kattukolom, the inhabitants were strongly attached to their own headmen and would probably not accept the authority of a European resident. Van Senden realized that the Company would not be prepared to invest on a large scale and that the chances of successful colonization by outsiders was small.

Therefore, Van Senden expected most from the change in the attitude of the people and his text is full of references to this. It was not for nothing that he cited with pleasure the story of the washerman who gave his life when attempting to remedy the blockage of the Tamblegammo tank by a large fish. "For the honour of mankind I wish to record this case as true, to have it carved on a stone in various languages and to write underneath in Golden letters: What a man! what a father! but most of all what a fellow citizen!"²⁶⁸ Van Senden considered this story an elevating example for the inhabitants.

This elaboration on Van Senden's journey reveals many of the practical issues at stake in the late eighteenth century Sri Lanka. It shows Europeans' growing self-confidence in relation to the management of nature, the sense that all natural obstacles could be overcome by human knowl-

edge and power. It also reveals an obsession with the island's ancient and rich past that strengthened his conviction that the region could and had to be more intensely cultivated. Van Senden strongly contrasted himself with the native population, who are clearly in need of European guidance to improve their lives and that of their children. The natives' fear of Europeans shows how little the Dutch had intruded into this region so far, although their fear could also be explained by their recent experience with French and the English troops behaving ruthlessly while they occupied the harbour of Trincomalee between 1782 and 1784.

Van Senden was not very sensitive to the actual problems of the inhabitants, in particular the diseases which afflicted them repeatedly. We now know that it was a malaria-prone area, and the debilitating influence of structural malaria on a population is a well known fact. Van Senden did not notice it because he did not know about it, he could not connect the stories about the devil *poedem* with the anopheles mosquito that probably bred in the tanks. His energetic and progressive attitude is typical of the period of Van de Graaff's governorship, and not surprisingly Van Senden was strongly attached to Van de Graaff. The outcomes of Van Senden's schemes for improvement were limited. Residents were appointed on his advice and the income from the paddy tithe increased fivefold, which points at significant improvements. But although the engineer Fornbauer made a precise plan for its repair in 1792, the Kantelai tank was never fully repaired. Van Senden died within three years after the journey.²⁶⁹

4.5 Colonial intervention in the Vanni

In his own memoir Van de Graaff dealt in great length with the progress of the paddy cultivation in all regions of the island. He stated that much progress had been made in this field in the previous years, with the exception of the Colombo *dessavony* where most workers were involved in cinnamon culture and could therefore not be involved in the improvement of the paddy culture.²⁷⁰ However, a lot had been achieved in other regions, notably, the outer parts of Matara, Batticaloa, the Vanni, and even a little in Trincomalee.

The achievements are difficult to assess, but if we are to believe Van de Graaff they were great and promising. We have seen already that Van Senden's plans for Trincomalee resulted in some expansion of agricultural output. The most structural approach had been in Batticaloa and the Vanni, where administrative reforms were more extensive and intensely supervised by two enterprising officials. In Batticaloa it was Jacob Burnand, a young man from Switzerland who had arrived on the island in 1778, and in the Vanni it was Lieutenant Thomas Nagel. Both success-

fully improved the agricultural situation in these neglected districts and their reputations lasted into British times. As we shall see, Governor Maitland used their work as example for his own policies in those regions and beyond. Therefore, their work merits a more extensive discussion.

The Vanni district covered the large area between the Jaffna peninsula and the Kingdom of Kandy and was largely inhabited by people of Tamil origin. Before the late eighteenth century, the administration of the Vanni had been the most obvious example of the VOC's system of indirect rule.²⁷¹ The *vanniyārs*, or local chiefs, were in theory subordinated to the Company and under the commandment of Jaffna. They had to pay a yearly tribute of forty elephants to the Company, but the Company did not otherwise meddle in their administration and they maintained a fair degree of autonomy. In the course of the eighteenth century their obligations became diluted and during the 1770s the Jaffna commander was complaining repeatedly that the *vanniyārs* were in arrears on the payment of their tribute. By 1780, troubles in the district caused by a succession struggle in one of the provinces of the Vanni allowed the colonial administration to step in.

The Company considered taking over the whole district, but due to the scale of the operation Governor Willem Iman Falck decided that only the province Karnawelpattu should be brought under direct Dutch rule. It was an experiment, and the aim was to learn how much profit this province would bring the Company. Falck had reason to have high expectations, since it was common knowledge that in ancient times the district had produced high yields. The resident, Mr Sprang, was requested to do everything in his power to improve agriculture.²⁷² By 1784, the *vanniyārs* in the other provinces started to rebel against the Dutch, which gave Governor Falck a reason to organize a punitive expedition. Under command of the lieutenant Thomas Nagel, the provinces were conquered one by one. Nagel was appointed as head of the district and commisisoned to improve the cultivation of paddy and increase the revenues of the district.²⁷³ In 1789, Nagel requested that the colonial government lease him the district for five years. Under his proposal he would personally make the necessary expenses to improve the local situation, provided he would be allowed to keep all revenue from it, except for the paddy-tithe. The military expenses would still be paid by government. His request was honoured.²⁷⁴

In 1794, Nagel requested an extension of the lease and wrote a memorandum to explain the successes achieved so far and his plans for the future. The memorandum is divided in nine paragraphs. The first four give an introduction to the district, its nature, its people and its history. Paragraphs five and six are concerned with the history of the Company's

presence in the district. Nagel describes how and why it was occupied and what improvements were made especially in the field of agriculture. In the following two sections Nagel elaborates on the strategic importance of the Vanni and gives a description of his plans for further improvement of agriculture. The final paragraph discusses his new proposal for the next ten years. Nagel's achievements in the district were considerable: he improved the income of paddy, collected as the Company's tithe, from 14,000 *parrahs* of paddy to 36,000 *parrahs*.²⁷⁵ In addition, the income from taxes on gardens and trade increased. What measures did he take to achieve this?

Thomas Nagel started with an administrative reorganization based on the Dutch administrative system in Jaffna. In the aftermath of his expeditions, he had put aside the *vanniyārs*, and in the new government they were left out. The civil administration consisted of ten, later twelve, Europeans or men of European descent and eighty natives, of whom sixty were *lascorins*.²⁷⁶ Next to that he adopted a headmen system: eighteen *mudaliyārs* were put in charge of the provincial government and thirty-six *majorals* were to work under them. The new land-courts were to apply the Jaffanese laws to the Vanni.²⁷⁷ Even the organization of the taxes and land revenues were copied from the Jaffna system. He ordered a *hoofdtombo* (family register, for the purpose of taxation) to be made and decided that like in Jaffna the people would be obliged to work twelve days a year for the Company (or to pay one rixdollar and four stivers for each day they did not work). The land tax was fixed at a tenth of the crop, to be paid either in kind or in money.²⁷⁸

The increase in agricultural output was achieved by three measures. First, after the bad harvests of 1787 and 1788 caused by a lack of rain Nagel lent seed to the peasants on his own account, to ensure a reasonable crop the following year. Second, he started a land registry, identifying the wasteland suitable for exploitation and reporting on the condition of the water-tanks belonging to the occupied fields. Because many of the tanks were in a bad state, he made a plan to repair them and figured that in total about twenty-five thousand rixdollars were needed to fix them all. Nagel shouldered the burden of these investments himself as part of the contract he made with Governor Van de Graaff in 1789. In the same year he employed four natives in the function of *adigār* with the specific task of overseeing the agriculture and the repair of the tanks. By 1793, much progress had been made, but more time was needed to meet the objectives. He planned to set up sugar, coffee and cotton plantations by forcing the poor inhabitants from the overcrowded Jaffna district to move to the Vanni and work on his plantations. He also intended to make the people of the Vanni cultivate these cash crops for the Company with one part of their fields. These plans were inspired by Anthony Blom's 1787 treatise

on sugar, cotton, coffee and cacao plantations in Surinam.²⁷⁹ Nagel regretted the fact that it was too complicated to keep African slaves on the island to set up a plantation on Blom's model, but he considered his own plan a good alternative.²⁸⁰

Nagel's rule over of the Vanni was quite different from that of the *vanniyārs*. The changes directly touched the interest of the people owing to the imposition of new taxes, the regulation of personal services and the fixing of land revenues. It was turned from a system of indirect rule based on feudal relations and only limited Company power to a relatively well organized state under European authority and a European administrative elite. The new organization was geared to agricultural development rather than to trade. The *vanniyārs* saw their power curtailed by Nagel and no longer played an official role in the inland administration. It is not clear whether or not they kept some power over the inhabitants based on their former position and traditional status.²⁸¹

4.6 Administrative reform in Batticaloa

The eight provinces of Batticaloa were governed by a chief of the rank of *onderkoopman*, from 1766 onwards. Jacob Burnand was the second person to hold this post, after his predecessor Francke had held it for eighteen years. Burnand was of Swiss origin and had arrived in Batavia in 1775 in the position of *onderkoopman*, and moved to Ceylon in 1778. It had been his intention to return to Europe in 1794 as a man *in bonis* after nineteen years of service in the East, but due to circumstances he had been forced to stay on the island and he remained there even after the British take-over.²⁸² Burnand wrote his memorandum for reasons that differed considerably from those of Nagel. He wanted to provide his successor Johannes Phillipus Wambeek with all the information necessary for the administration of the district and, in his own words, "particularly [with] the plan which I am of the opinion should be constantly followed in order to answer the well-grounded expectation of making further improvements".²⁸³ Like Nagel, Burnand had come to the district with the governor's commission to improve the agriculture and increase the income of paddy.²⁸⁴ In this he succeeded, by enlarging the income from the tenth on paddy fivefold, from 17,010 *parrahs* to almost 60,000 *parrahs*. He even predicted that if policies were continued along the same lines, in future it would be possible to obtain one *last* or 84,000 *parrahs* of paddy. The measures he took to achieve this were as follows.²⁸⁵

When Burnand arrived in Batticaloa he ruled over about forty thousand people and had twelve European civil servants at his command.²⁸⁶ For the administration of the district the chief had to rely heavily on the

co-operation of the native headmen, called *hoofd-pedies*. These men collected the paddy tithe for the Company and functioned as justices in the rural assembly. They all came from a group of about five hundred families who held half the fields in the district and who had also served as headmen under Kandyan rule. These families were called *Mukuvassen*.²⁸⁷

Soon after his arrival Burnand perceived two major defects in the administration of the district. The first was in the organization of the collection of the tithe: the headmen tended to keep the larger part of the tenth for themselves. The second deficiency lay in the organization of the *oeliam*-services (corvée labour), which put the burden on the field labourers, the group of people who in his opinion were the crucial factor in achieving any improvement in agriculture. Due to their connection to the land, they were easy victims for the headmen who had to organize the *oeliam*-services. By forcing them to perform the Company's heavy coolie-work like dragging timber, they got worn out and were taken away from their daily task of working on the land. As a result they spent less time on the fields and produced only a small harvest. Other people, who were supposed to perform services bribed their headmen or hid from them.²⁸⁸

Just like Van de Graaff, Burnand aimed to rationalize the taxes and services, and to increase control over the headmen. To achieve this, he developed a consistent bureaucracy. He did not abolish the corvée duties of the field labourers, but he decided that they were not to be used anymore to perform heavy labour for the Company. Instead their services would consist only of activities that would improve agricultural conditions such as repairing tanks and dams vital for the irrigation of their fields.²⁸⁹ At the same time, the people who were not involved in agriculture were registered carefully and their traditional duties were fixed. Burnand categorized society in eighteen castes, or occupational groups. He registered all groups and his memorandum discusses the functions of each in society, their size, their place of abode and the taxes and services that each owed to the Company.²⁹⁰

At first he had organized the paddy collection in a manner similar to the way Van de Graaff had done it in the southwest. The headmen were kept responsible for the organization and supervision of agriculture, and the paddy taxes were farmed out to the highest bidder. By 1789 Burnand came to the conclusion that he could not rely on the headmen at all, despite his efforts to strengthen his control over them:

All pains taken to make use of these headmen in carrying the present regulations into effect [have] proved fruitless either by their negligence or reluctance to take the trouble upon them or because they saw no chance to enrich themselves with the revenue of Government [...].²⁹¹

Therefore he decided to overlook the headmen and organized a native administration, composed of *canicopolies*, native accountants, and *canga-*

nies, overseers. Their tasks were clearly defined and they received a fixed salary. He described in detail how these native servants should function, how they had to make use of “annotation *olas*” (palm leaves) to report on the crop and its collection, and how often they should make these reports and send them to the secretary’s office.²⁹² His attitude towards these civil servants was rigid. He stressed that they only worked properly if the authority of the chief was firmly established by punishing them heavily from the outset for every little attempt at fraud.²⁹³ Here he deviated from the policies of Van de Graaff for the southwest, but resembled more the administration of Nagel in the Vanni.

By installing this twofold administration, Burnand aimed at marginalizing the headmen and rendering the Company independent of them. Despite some temporary opposition from the headmen, this was achieved in course of time and he was able to state that the “most part of them is at present entirely unnecessary and may be dispensed with, the sole utility will be to let them act as controllers of the native servants [...]”.²⁹⁴ The headmen’s income was further curtailed by the prohibition against accepting any presents from inferior chiefs or to taking fines in court. In fact, these prohibitions had been brought in to practice after the proclamations of Van de Graaff against the taking of the *paresses*, a step which was highly praised by Burnand in this memorandum.²⁹⁵

Another step to limit the power of the headmen over the people was taken in the field of justice. Burnand reorganized the rural assemblies: instead of every six weeks, as under his predecessor, they were held only twice a year. Moreover, they functioned not as the main courts for all sorts of civil and criminal cases, but mainly as an agricultural board where the expected harvests and revenues were discussed. Only cases that could directly be decided upon could be brought to trial here. This was done to improve the legal security of the common people, since they were often opponents of the headmen in the court cases. In 1789 a *landraad* was established. Native judges were appointed directly by the Company and the headmen played no role here. The final responsibility of the verdicts lay in the hands of the Dutch chief of Batticaloa, which gave him great authority over both the people and the headmen.²⁹⁶

In his discussion of plans for the future, Burnand elaborated on the importance of trade for the district. He was of the opinion that free trade in local agricultural products and circulation of money would prove to be an encouragement for agriculture. He stated that in previous times, the price of grain had been kept artificially low, which kept people from producing more than what they needed themselves. He criticized the Company’s general policy of monopolizing even local trade and he praised the measures taken by Van de Graaff in 1786 to leave the paddy-trade in the district free.²⁹⁷

4.7 Conclusion

For the first time, not only the southwest and Jaffna peninsula were subject to the processes of colonial intervention. The peripheral regions' experience of colonial intrusion was however very different from that in the core regions. Here the main aim of the colonial rulers was to increase the production of rice, and Van de Graaff explicitly designated these areas as the storage-rooms for the rest of the island.

Although the governor increased the agricultural output, this was not entirely a success story. In Matara the native labourers rebelled against the continuous call for labour. In general, the increased exploitation seems to have weighed heavily on the backs of the peasants. The new opportunities for some of the native chiefs caused jealousies among them and some of the Dutch officials. In the peripheral districts, the Dutch heads like Van Senden found that it was not an easy task to convince the local inhabitants to produce more than they needed for themselves. The continuous struggle for life and the natural and mystical threats that surrounded them made it useless in their eyes to expand their agricultural production. And although the administrators of the peripheral districts managed to increase the output of paddy, the clash of cultures and mentalities reveals the limited reach of colonial plans and policies, something with which the British were to deal with as well.

In the peripheral districts the native administration was dealt with very differently than in the core districts. There, the former elites were banned from their position and replaced by either Dutch or Portuguese burghers in the Vanni, or by men from the Vellalle caste in Batticaloa. Clearly they found themselves in a very different position from the powerful native headmen in the southwest. Did this relate to a weak social-economic organization in the region, the absence of Kandyan interests in these regions, or the very specific historical collaboration between the Dutch and the headmen in the southwest? This question will be taken up in the later chapters on British policies.