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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 FIVE

DUTCH PERCEPTIONS OF THE COLONIAL ORDER

In 1809, Jacob Burnand, who remained on the island after the British take-over, wrote a paper for the second British governor, Thomas Maitland (1805-1811), about the Dutch mode of government. In these “fragments on Ceylon” Burnand drew quite a positive image of the Dutch rulers of Ceylon in the last decades. He literally referred to the governors Van Angelbeek, Van de Graaff, and Falck as enlightened rulers and praised Van de Graaff for his innovative policies. He argued that Van de Graaff aspired to change society at a moderate pace and that he thought that this was to be achieved by enlightened authoritarian rule, through a good legal system like the *landraad* and systematic registration of all land and people. With regard to the bonded services, Burnand argued that Van de Graaff’s long-term view was that in time the people would be freed from their services through redemption in money or kind. In some cases Burnand criticized the policies of Van de Graaff and referred to his own methods in Batticaloa. How to deal with this picture of Burnand, should it be taken seriously, or did he portray an imagined situation for the purposes of illustration? Perhaps the paper was written in this way rather to underpin Maitland’s own “enlightened” line of approach. In other words, were Van de Graaff and his officials, Burnand included, really influenced by contemporary, enlightened, political thought and does this help explain their choice of policy?

Moreover, the move to the periphery, the increased colonial intervention in the core-districts and the emphasis on exploitation of the territories under Dutch occupation as a means to increase the revenue for the Company, resemble contemporary developments in Java. In particular the experiments with systems of forced labour in the core regions and the formal regulation of the tasks of the subordinated native headmen are reminiscent of similar actions taken on the northeast coast of Java. Interestingly, Governor Van de Graaff had never served on Java or elsewhere in the Indonesian archipelago. These similarities lead one to wonder whether it is possible to speak of a typical Dutch-colonial approach to new challenges in this era of change.

5.1 *Developments in Europe*

In Western Europe, the last decades of the eighteenth century were tur-

bulent. The American War of Independence (1778-1784) and the French Revolution of 1789 were two major manifestations of a new political-intellectual wave that affected Europe and its colonies. In the Netherlands it led to the patriotic revolt of 1787 against the *Stadhouder* Willem V. The rebellion was soon quelled with Prussian assistance and the *patriotten* fled to France where they participated in the French Revolution and witnessed the rise of Napoleon. With French support they returned to the Netherlands in 1795 to take over power; the Dutch Republic was renamed the *Bataafse Republiek* and the *patriotten* began to draft a new constitution based on the modern political views.²⁹⁸

The scientific developments of the previous decades and industrial and economic developments led to new visions of society, politics and economy.²⁹⁹ In the eighteenth century, France had been the epicentre of enlightened philosophical thought, with leading *philosophes* like Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau criticizing the existing political and social order.³⁰⁰ Most prominent were the new ideas regarding the ideal polity which they developed in reaction to the absolute power of their monarch. The idea of the *trias politica*, with the separation of the legislative, the executive and the juridical powers as its basis, became the principal argument in their quest for reform. In the second half of the eighteenth century, French *économistes* or physiocrats like François Quesnay and Scottish philosophers like David Hume and Adam Smith shifted the focus to issues of moral politics, political economy and improvement of society. The progress of society became one of the major issues of Enlightenment thought, in which freedom and individuality became important criteria.³⁰¹

The eighteenth-century philosophers were not just concerned with Europe but also showed great interest in the world overseas. At an early stage, descriptions of the world beyond Europe were used to show the defects of their own societies. Later, these arguments made way for new overall theories on the development of humankind. The concept of the gradual progress of human societies through certain defined stages became very popular. Thanks to a growing body of travel literature, an increased knowledge of the world enabled people to find living examples for each of these stages. The lowest stage was the most primitive, closest to natural man, for which the Aborigines of Australia served as example, while the highest and most developed was, according to most, embodied in the inhabitants of Western Europe.³⁰²

By the end of the century this mode of thinking had spread to the Netherlands, Britain and elsewhere in Europe.³⁰³ The insights in the natural progress of human societies and the enlightened ideals of freedom initially led to critical attitudes towards colonialism. Ideals like liberty and equality which were central in Europe did not match the colonial

situation. The American War of Independence, which had been a direct response to the new ideals of civil rights, had been a great shock to the European powers and made them insecure about which direction to take. Some intellectuals pointed at the risk of imperial over-stretch and the impossibility of ruling over such enormous distances and made comparisons with the Roman Empire. Another argument was that progress of the indigenous societies in the colonies was hampered by repressive colonial policies.

The enlightened critique focused on three issues: first was the mercantilist attitude of the big East India companies, which hampered the economic development of the colonies and undermined their economic capacity. Second was the question of whether Europeans actually had the right to rule over native societies. Third was the debate about whether rule over indigenous peoples corrupted the European mind and led to excessive behaviour among the colonial officials towards the native society. In that context, slavery was seen as a particular manifestation of barbarous European rule and was criticized most vehemently. Although it was prevalent everywhere in Europe, the severity of this critique, the public concern and debate and its effects differed from country to country. For now we confine ourselves to the reception of such ideas in the Netherlands and on Ceylon in the late eighteenth century.

It is generally assumed that the Dutch had little concern for the moral issues brought forward by Enlightenment thinkers in relation to the colonies, and certainly not prior to 1795. Schutte has emphasized in his study *De Nederlandse patriotten en de koloniën* that although the future of the Dutch East India Company and means of financial and organizational reform was reflected upon by many from the 1780s onwards, in practice not much changed. The Company and its mercantilist attitude remained as they were. When it concerned civil rights, Schutte stresses that all the authors talked about was the position of European settlers in the colonies. He concludes: "The native population remained outside of all discussions; only the slave trade formed an exception. Slavery, though in principle considered despicable, was in practice considered as a necessary evil."³⁰⁴ The endeavours of the Protestant Hernhutter (Moravian) community to Christianize and emancipate the slaves in the West Indies was a notable exception.³⁰⁵

Schutte does not elaborate much on the question of why the Dutch were not much concerned with the situation in the colonies in the East and West. His main explanation is that the VOC-ruled territories were still seen as a closed shop not subject to interference from public opinion or Parliament in the mother country. Of course there were instances when information regarding the Dutch situation in Asia trickled into Dutch society, as in the case of the work of Jacob Haafner published in the early

nineteenth century. He severely criticized the Dutch religious policies in the East and he expressed a high esteem for the indigenous religion and culture. Interestingly though, his most outstanding critique regarded the activities of the British rather than the Dutch East India Company in Asia. In his description of their war conduct during the early 1780s in India, he expressed his abhorrence for their treatment of his fellow Europeans, but he was shocked even more by the Britons' ruthless attitude towards the native populations, and he describes how thousands of people starved to death due to the British war operations. The impact on Dutch public opinion of Haafner's and others' colonial criticism was very limited.³⁰⁶

This Dutch indifference regarding the fate of native populations in Asia in this period has been accepted by historians almost without question. In comparison, the absence of a strong anti-slavery movement has long been considered a Dutch anomaly and the subject of much debate. For abolitionism is considered one of the clearest manifestations of the intellectual and popular criticism of colonial practices elsewhere in Europe. Whereas the rise of capitalism and industrialization are usually used to explain the emergence of the anti-slavery movements in Britain, the Americas and elsewhere, the Dutch situation did not match that model.³⁰⁷

Recently, Angelie Sens has discussed the absence of an influential abolitionist movement in the Netherlands around 1800 and placed it in a cultural context, rather than an economic one. Through her analysis of popular reading and pamphlets she convincingly disputes Schutte's argument that the Dutch public was inadequately informed about developments in the colonies. She advances the idea that the public debate in the Netherlands at that time really concerned the peculiar situation of the Dutch themselves, their decline from the "golden age" of the seventeenth century, and their determination to seek new directions. Sens argues that agitating against slavery as an institution could be explained as a denial of the virtues of the seventeenth century, when slavery in the colonial possessions was an accepted institution. This may explain why abolitionism did not appeal to the Dutch public. On the other hand, she detects a sense of humanitarianism in the explicit Dutch ideal of civilizing the slaves through education, and good treatment. Because of the introspective nature of the Dutch public debate, the colonial governments in the Americas experienced hardly any pressure from home to change their attitude. Perhaps Sens' explanation for the absence of an abolitionist movement in the Netherlands in the late eighteenth century helps explain the simultaneous lack of interest in the colonial practices in the East.³⁰⁸

5.2 *Ceylon and the colonial criticism*

It is difficult to grasp the Dutch colonial attitude towards Ceylon in the last decades of the eighteenth century. Schutte concluded for the Dutch community on Java that the situation was not much different from that in the Netherlands. He found no signs of influence of enlightenment or patriotic thought in the execution of colonial policy. In fact, even though typical elements of late eighteenth-century Dutch intellectual and cultural life were present in the Batavian European community, in the form of the Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences³⁰⁹ and masonry-clubs, this did not much influence colonial rule as such.³¹⁰ Certainly, Dirk van Hogendorp strove for a government on modern principles and demanded the abolition of slavery and bonded labour in the East in the 1790s. However, he never gained strong support and his ideas were never put into practice.³¹¹

The situation on Ceylon seems to have been not much different from that on Java. There were two masonry clubs in Colombo, but they remain very obscure and it is unclear how they functioned. Prominent members of government were also affiliated with the Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences. The official letters sent home were not very reflective and remained silent on intellectual inspirations behind new policies. Governor Van de Graaff's reforms were however so substantial that one would expect to find some contemplation on the mission of the Company on the island. Was there, as Burnand suggested, any relation with the new political theories that had developed in Europe, and was there any moral motive behind these policies?

There is no doubt that the Company officials overseas were acquainted with the intellectual and political developments in Europe and in the Netherlands. Sluijsken's remark on the French *philosophes* in a letter sent to Van Braam in December 1785, bears evidence of it.

The great Venalon [Fénélon], in his *Telemachus* [1699], the cardinal Alberonie [Giulio Alberoni], in his *testament politique* [1753] and the abbot Raynal, in his *Histoire Politique and Philisophique* convince all of us that it is the duty of all regents, to urge their subjects to commerce and agriculture. They profess that these two branches are the source of abundance in any country. Furthermore they say that by bringing these to flower is the only means to make a country powerful and blooming. They also point out how necessary it is to stimulate the people thereto through rewards. It is said that all governing sovereigns in Europe have accepted this political system. It is generally known that the island Ceylon is very fertile. It has a fortunate climate and the inhabitants would not be suffering from want of everything if one would only put the hands to work, to make use of this island's fertility.³¹²

Sluijsken mentioned in his letter a motley collection of eighteenth-century politicians and intellectuals. He may have been trying to show off how well-read he was; the letter was after all written to promote himself and

to ask Van Braam for help in furthering his career in the East.³¹³ Yet, his positive reference to the Abbé Raynal surprises, for Raynal was a severe and influential critic of the excesses of colonialism in general and the monopolistic rule of the VOC in particular.

Raynal's *Histoire philosophique et politique des établissements et du commerce des Européens dans les Deux Indes* was first published in 1770.³¹⁴ As the title reveals, the books (for there are seven volumes) present a critical overview of the situation in the European colonies in the East and West Indies. In addition, a general perspective on the various political and economic issues of colonialism is given. The work was of an encyclopaedic nature written by various authors and its message is consequently a little diffuse. Moreover, Raynal and his co-authors made substantial changes in the various subsequent editions.³¹⁵ Although the work was much criticized for its factual mistakes, it became one of the best-sellers of the eighteenth century, with more than forty reprints in French and translations into Dutch, German and English. It was a much quoted work in the anti-slavery debates of the late eighteenth century.³¹⁶

The criticism on the Companies in Asia received not as much attention, but was very substantial. In the second part of the first volume, the mercantilist system and the monopolies of the VOC were attacked. Raynal's portrayal of the Dutch Company was one of decline because of greed and decadence. Raynal preferred the organization of the English East India Company above that of the Dutch Company and repeatedly, while comparing the two, he urged the Dutch to look at their "insular neighbours" as an example. The major problem of the VOC was its complex administrative structure, which hampered its decision-making process and its adaptability. Moreover, the Company's monopolistic and jealous attitudes towards other traders were a great evil. Raynal argued that the VOC's policies had to be overturned, that Batavia should be opened up for all traders. As far as he was concerned many of the superfluous small trading factories in Asia could be closed down. In this way, the Company could greatly reduce its costs and prevent the other Europeans from turning against them.

During his textual tour along all the Dutch possessions, Raynal also discussed the colony of Ceylon and in line with the rest of his text, he criticized the monopolistic attitudes there. He further noted that, although much of the land was under Dutch rule, cultivation of the soil was not promoted. The land and its inhabitants were left in a poor state, people had become lazy, they lived in little shacks, ate nothing but fruits of the land and only the richest had some cloths to wrap around their waist. Under the heading 'hints of policy recommended to the Dutch for improving their settlement there', he advised the Dutch, and for that matter, all European powers in Asia:

that they [should] distribute the lands to families. They will forget, and perhaps detest their former sovereign; They will attach themselves to government, which keeps itself busy with their happiness. They will work, they will consume. Then, the island of Ceylon will enjoy the affluence, for which nature has destined her. It would be a shelter for revolutions, and capable of supporting the establishment of Malabar and Coromandel.³¹⁷

This phrase clearly demonstrates the ambiguous attitude of Raynal towards colonialism: though he generally despised the actual European power over native societies, he in fact gave here very practical advice on how to optimize the gains on the island and retain order and security. In his general criticism of the Company rule in Asia, he placed a lot of emphasis on the devastating effects of ruthless policies towards native societies and the exclusive attitudes towards the other European traders. Raynal repeatedly predicted that this would in the end backfire on the Company: the natives would rebel against the Dutch for their maltreatment and the other European East Indian Companies would wage war against the Dutch to gain access to the closed markets and trading products.

Still, independence of the colonies was not an option, but the opening up of the markets and good treatment of the natives was.³¹⁸ Raynal did not propagate to change the native societies, rather he saw the way the native societies were structured was a given, with which the colonizers had to live. In his general advice for the VOC at the end of his treatise of the Dutch activities in the East, he stated that the task of the Dutch governments in Asia was:

to restore harmony, which is a task that grows most necessary and more difficult every day, agents should be appointed, who, with a spirit of moderation should unite a knowledge of the interests, customs, language, religion and manners of these nations. At present perhaps the Company may be unprovided with persons of this stamp, but it concerns her to procure such.³¹⁹

Despite his critical attitude towards the Company's policies in the East, it is not difficult to see why Raynal's work would appeal to the men on Ceylon. The need for change that was felt locally was reinforced by Raynal's criticism and suggestions. His explicit remarks in relation to Ceylon may have given them a justification to actively extend Dutch territorial power on the island, increase the exploitation of the land and to seek a long-term solution for the financial problems of the island's colonial government. Could the work of Raynal, written and published for an audience in Europe, have really inspired Van de Graaff and his contemporaries in Ceylon?

Although men like Sluijsken and Van de Graaff had been in the East for a long time, they were not entirely detached from home. They kept

regular contact through letters and were kept apprised of affairs back home through newspapers, books and pamphlets. A rare example of a list of books owned by Company officials at the time is found in the estate of Selarius of Cochin, who possessed endless books, in which also Raynal and other philosophes featured.³²⁰ Intellectually, Europe and the Netherlands were closer to some of the Dutchmen on Ceylon than is sometimes assumed on the basis of their long absence from Europe. The political developments and power politics at home interested Dutch officials, not least because they depended on their connections at home for their advancement in the East. For example, when the Batavian revolution spread over the Netherlands, the Dutch in the East also chose sides of either the stadholder or the patriots.³²¹

5.3 *Van de Graaff's "response"*

Let us recapitulate some of Van de Graaff's policies vis-à-vis the interior: he intensified agriculture in the core-regions by planting cinnamon trees in plantations and gardens and having wasteland distributed for cultivation. The new land leases were given on the condition that one-third was planted with commercial crops for the Company. He involved the native headmen in this operation by making the supervision and promotion of agriculture an important part of their newly regulated tasks. He further stimulated the headmen to persevere in these agricultural projects by promising them better positions and giving them honorary rewards in the form of medals and other prestige gifts. Company officials were also urged to promote cultivation by promising them a percentage of the increased crop in the districts under their supervision.

In relation to the peasantry, Van de Graaff realized that improvement could only be achieved by peace and order among the cultivators and their headmen. Therefore he kept the headmen in check through the new task-descriptions, which functioned as a contract between the colonial government and the local chief and kept the chief accountable for his actions. Moreover, to make sure that only those with the best intentions and capabilities would get the position of headman, minor or superior, the tradition of gift-giving upon appointment was abandoned. The idea was that the headmen could now only seek legitimatization of their power through appointments by the Dutch government; also, it served as a subversion of the autonomous power of the headmen that was usually confirmed in that ritual of gift-giving.

In this way, the "common man" was protected from the extortion of the headmen that was the object of such frequent complaint. Moreover, their private interests were secured by new regulations for the *landraad*.

The acceptance of presents by the headmen and Dutch officials was now forbidden when someone wished to register a complaint, and officials were no longer allowed to keep fines. This was to prevent the arbitrary administration of justice, which had often led to long delays in trials and appeals to higher courts. The rationale underlying these reforms was quite practical: the sooner conflicts were solved, the sooner everyone could return to the fields.

Van de Graaff underscored his words with deeds and within one month after his proclamation against the taking of gifts from inferiors, in August 1784 he temporarily suspended Don Siman Wijesoendere Senewiratne Dissanaijke, *mudaliyār* of the Belligam *corle*, for having received such gifts. Undoubtedly this was done to set an example for the others.³²² Later, in 1793, Bartholomeus Raket was impeached for giving lucrative tax farms to certain headmen after receiving substantial gifts from them. Clearly, Van de Graaff believed that if this form of fair and harmonious rule was combined with active promotion of agriculture, the colony would become prosperous. Can we understand the new line of policy as an answer to the predicament of despotic Company rule, and therefore as an answer to the type of critique expressed by Raynal?

This question is difficult to answer. Even if the new measures agree with Raynal's advice on Ceylon and the colonial operations in the East generally, this still does not prove any direct correlation. It is more likely that the measures should be seen as political interventions that were based on local officials' lengthy experiences in the local administration. Van de Graaff's predecessors like Van Goens and Van Imhoff had also expressed their intention to contain the native headmen and to encourage agricultural development of the island. Although they never succeeded in this, their writings may have served as much as examples for the officials on Ceylon as that of Raynal. To make things more complex: Raynal had made much use of Van Imhoff's comments on the Company's policies, written when he was governor-general in the 1740s.³²³

On the other hand the initiative for the new projects lay by and large with Van de Graaff on Ceylon. Except for the cinnamon cultivation, he could have decided to keep things as they were, as his predecessor Falck had done. The money he used to develop the island could have been spent to draw rice from abroad. Instead, Van de Graaff consciously made huge expenses on agricultural development and instigated major changes in the inland administration. Also, he decided to invest in the peripheral areas and turn these into the island's breadbasket. He must have had a positive long-term vision on the island's destiny and must have been confident of his goals to have done all this despite the Batavian government's opposition. It is likely that the writings of Raynal and others provided him that long-term perspective, and that this, in combination with Van

Imhoff's legacy, gave him the confidence to undertake the required action.

The following analysis of the discussions relating to the indigenous society exposed in the memoranda of the officials who operated in the periphery sheds more light on the question of how policy on Ceylon related to contemporary European thought about the non-European world and the criticisms of colonialism. The new enterprises there, the increased agricultural exploitation and new efficiency in the practice of colonial power over the inhabitants, appears to have encouraged these colonial officials to further reflect on the choices made and on their mission on the island. They may give us a clearer idea of the visions of society and the ideals pursued by the Company's officials on the island.

5.4 *The vision of Jacques Fabrice van Senden*

In Chapter Four we gave a description of Van Senden's tour of 1786 through the districts adjacent to Trincomalee. In that context his zeal for exploitation was emphasized: he considered everything he came across as fit for development. In the discussion of his encounter with the inhabitants of this neglected district, it was also pointed out how Van Senden contrasted himself with them. He exhorted them to be active and enterprising – as he was – by showing the inhabitants how to plant their gardens or sow their fields. He demonstrated his superior technological knowledge and hoped to bring this knowledge across to them. He wished to challenge them to make investments and to produce more than they needed in order to sell their crops on the markets. He ridiculed their folk stories by waving these off as superstition. He considered them childlike for attributing certain artefacts or ruins to spirits, mythical women and devils and showed off his Western rational knowledge by fixing some obstruction in the Kantelai tank.

One of the central points in his writings is that the natives needed civilization to lift them out of their inertia and backwardness. Illustrative of this outlook is the remark he made during his visit in the village of Niellepalle in Kottiyar. Van Senden complained about the lack of knowledge among the people. He pointed out to the *vanniyār* who accompanied him that children should learn to read and write, otherwise they would remain at the level of animals:

That as long as he [the *vanniyār*] as regent and father of his people did not take care of the education of his children, he could never hope to have authority over the people, they would remain merely humans in appearance but stupid dull animals in deeds, to whom no lust for improvement of their state and consequently of the country of their abode could ever be inspired.³²⁴

This image of the dull natural man, in contrast to the energetic civilized man is encountered often in the text.³²⁵ The inhabitants could best be brought to civilization through good examples, upbringing and education, and for the best results one had to start with the children since they were still young and innocent. They would have to learn from a young age to lead an active life by putting them to work while they were still young and sending them to school at the same time.³²⁶ The best students should be rewarded with presents and upon reaching adulthood they should be able to obtain the highest positions in the native administration. In that way, civilization was equated with status, and good examples would follow automatically. Although he expected the headmen to cooperate in this, he thought it to be best if the headmen were to be supervised by European residents. After all, the headmen had been given too much freedom when they served under the Kandyan king, which had led them to rule in an arbitrary way.³²⁷

Van Senden had a positive view of society because he felt that every human, however close he once stood to nature, had the potential to develop himself. The civilization process would find its expression in economic behaviour, and only once does he add hesitantly that this might lead in the end to Christianity. But conversion was not really his aim. Van Senden was actually much interested in the practice of Hinduism and Buddhism which he encountered and more than once he asked for a translation of the ancient texts that were kept in the temples that he saw. Not surprisingly, he refers at times to contemporary travel authors like Sonnerat who had travelled through India and paid much attention to the origin of the Indian religion, ruins and artefacts, and who had published a travel account in 1782.³²⁸ Van Senden gives the reader the impression of being much concerned with and sympathetic towards the fate of the natives. At the end of the diary, Van Senden addresses himself to the governor, and asked him to do as much as was in his power to improve the situation in Trincomalee. Moreover, he expressed the hope that his advice would not only lead to the improvement of agriculture and the "morals of the inhabitants", but also "to the fortune of at least some blacks".³²⁹

Two other examples of writings by Company officials who worked in the periphery may enlighten us and help answering these questions. In the following two sections the memoranda of Thomas Nagel and Jacob Burnand will be discussed and compared with those of Van Senden.

5.5 *Thomas Nagel and the Vanni*

We already saw that in 1789 Nagel had leased the district of the Vanni from the colonial government on the promise that he would ensure tran-

quility and develop it and deliver a quota of paddy to the Company. Five years later he wrote a memorandum requesting an extension of the lease. Although Batavia had not yet consented to his request, he was still in charge of the district when the British arrived. The following description of the meeting which Colonel Stuart had with him highlights Nagel's peculiar position as a private entrepreneur in the district:

With respect to Mr Nagel the land regent of the Wannys demand for subsistence for himself and the servants who were employed under him at Molletivoe [Mullaitivu], as servants of the late Dutch Company – you will inform him I am very much surprised at this application when he must recollect, that he himself informed me at Molletivoe, that he paid not only the civil servants, but the military, who were employed with him at that place, and that the Dutch Company had nothing to do with them, and in consequence he claimed the whole of the property found there as his own and would not allow that any part of it belonged to the Dutch Company.³³⁰

In Chapter Four we discussed the measures he took to improve the situation in this territory. These ranged from the replacement of the chiefs with native servants, the introduction of the Jaffnanese laws, the repair of the water tanks and the advances of paddy seeds. He also planned to have the inhabitants plant parts of their land with cash crops like cotton, sugar and coffee, although he would have preferred to have proper plantations in the style of the West Indies, including the slaves from Africa. For this he was inspired by the treatise of Anthony Blom on the management of plantations in Surinam. Blom's book was very popular in the Netherlands at the time.³³¹ Furthermore, the memorandum gives an impression of his mentality through his reflection on the native society.

The first four paragraphs of the memorandum serve as a legitimization of the Company's possession of the district. In the first place, the right of the Company to the land was undisputable because it was based on the early conquest during the war with the Portuguese. The *vanniyārs* had since then always served under the Company. Even though the *vanniyārs* had become more and more powerful, and the VOC had been negligent and uninterested in the district, the Company had never actually ceded its right to the land. Therefore the expeditions undertaken in 1780, 1784, and 1785 against the troublesome *vanniyārs* were legitimate.

In the remainder of this plea two assumptions are highlighted: first, Nagel depicts the *vanniyārs* as tyrannical headmen, who ruled their people arbitrarily without proper laws. It was therefore no more than just for the Company to remove them from their powerful positions after its occupation of the district. However, as we have seen in chapter four, instead of installing new headmen on their positions, Nagel completely overturned the existing administrative structure.

Second, he legitimized these policies by placing the inhabitants of the

Vanni on the lowest scale of human development. This reminds us of the remarks made by Van Senden on the animal-like men. However, Nagel takes the argument further: "The people of the Vanni", he wrote, "are the most primitive kind, on the most natural and basic stage of human development and are much in need of Company rule to be civilized."³³² To give some examples: they had never been out of the district, there was hardly any money in circulation, and they knew nothing. They "are surprised to see artefacts like watches and paintings" and "when looking at a mirror they are so taken by their mirror image that nothing can distract them from looking at that image". Moreover, they were the dirtiest people he knew: they bathed in dirty water, among their own excrements and their buffaloes. Their deceased were not buried deep in the ground, but left close to their homes to rot and to be eaten by birds.³³³

His argument is not only based on some random examples, but it is actually well developed in the memorandum and substantiated by Nagel's discussion of three particular features of the inhabitants of the district. In the first place, he presented them as people without history. At one time the district had experienced a period of great prosperity, of which the remnants, the ruins of large buildings and tanks, bore witness. However, Nagel was certain that this great ancient culture had been destroyed by a natural disaster, leaving the district desolate and uninhabited. It was only then that the current inhabitants had moved into the district, consequently they did not have any connection whatsoever with those ancient, much more sophisticated, people. Nagel underpinned his view by stating that these people had no memory whatsoever of that ancient society in either written or oral traditions. In fact, he attested that these people had no common memory whatsoever. They did not even know what their origin was, or how they arrived at the Vanni.³³⁴

Second, he pointed out that, though they were Hindu in name they were in practice people without religion because they had been instructed badly. He was certain, nonetheless, that they would be ready for conversion to Protestantism. Due to the Company's neglect, they had never had the opportunity to be taught the catechism even though he knew from personal experience that they were eager to learn. At the request of one of the elderly inhabitants of the district, Nagel had asked a Lutheran missionary, who was on his way to Jaffna and could speak the language, to educate these people. "From seven in the morning till the afternoon he instructed them about the parable Matthew 21 verse 33 to 44³³⁵ and they were so very content." Not surprisingly, this is the "Parable of the Tenants", which deals with the ideal behaviour of husbandmen towards their landowner, which of course fitted perfectly with Nagel's ambitions for the agricultural development of the region. Nagel hoped that a conversion to Christianity would help improve the attitude of the people. He

regretted that his own efforts to bring in schoolteachers from Jaffna, had proven to be fruitless, and that at the moment of writing this situation had not yet improved.³³⁶

Third, he represented the people of the Vanni as people without government, law or institutions. He wrote sarcastically: "The laws of the Vanni were thus very short, because there were none, neither from tradition, nor written by their lord."³³⁷ The *vanniyārs* were to blame for this, because they applied laws arbitrarily, they could always be bribed, and they protected criminals. However, the fault was also with the people themselves, because they were so uncivilized. Their houses were nothing more than little huts, their ploughs were of the simplest sort, and they were extremely lazy. Moreover, their marriages were not based on any religious or official ceremony, but on mutual consent. Adultery was a general feature of life and men and women could easily leave each other. Nagel concludes therefore that their rules and habits were totally against natural law and therefore the society was lawless.³³⁸ By representing the inhabitants as people without history, without religion and without laws, he underpinned his statement that they belonged to the people of "the lowest order".

The improvement of the "primitive people" of the Vanni was certainly possible according to Nagel, and in fact he considered this his duty, which gave him a moral justification for his rule over the inhabitants of the Vanni. He praised himself for having brought them already to a "higher step of humaneness".³³⁹ Despite this negative description, his attitude towards the people was positive: he described them as children in need of a sensible father to raise them. They were lazy and indolent at first, but after a period of good government, they would improve quickly and they could improve even more in the future. Nagel demonstrated an optimistic belief in the possibilities of social change.³⁴⁰ However, he did not elaborate much on the practical aspect of this social engineering, nor did he say exactly what he had achieved. He only stated at several points that they had already reached a higher level of civilization because he was reforming them into useful people. How he did so remains vague, and all that can be deduced is that their situation bettered in parallel with the improvement of agriculture and the virtue of the Company's government. This last element he stresses over and over again, warning his readers that it takes a generation to pick the fruits of such labour. He therefore pointed out that his attention was always focused on the children, more than on the adults, who were already "spoiled".

It is astonishing to find the image of the inhabitants created by Nagel fitting so neatly with the European scholarly conceptions of non-European societies. While Van Senden only made a distinction between civilized and uncivilized people, Nagel left no doubt for his contemporaries

about the stage of development of his subjects. In fact, it is as though his description of the people of the Vanni was derived from some sort of “textbook on people of the lowest order”. It is precisely the neatness of Nagel’s description that raises doubts about whether it was really applicable to the circumstances of the people in the Vanni or whether it was intended as rhetoric. Neither his predecessors, nor his successors in the district used the same vocabulary to describe the people of the Vanni. They all agree that it was a poor area, but none describes it as lawless, without religion, or inhabited with men as dirty as animals.³⁴¹ Nagel may well have exaggerated to appeal to the moral sentiments of his superiors in order to obtain their permission for his plans. In doing so, he gave strong proof of the need for the Company’s intervention in the district and of his own indispensability to the mission.³⁴²

Though Nagel touches upon some of the pet topics of Enlightenment and uses them to justify his policies, others, like liberty and equality, receive no attention at all. He regarded bondage as useful, and in fact he re-installed bonded labour as a government institution without any discussion.³⁴³ If it had been possible he would have transferred hundreds of African or Moluccan slaves to Ceylon, to start a plantation based on Blom’s Surinamese model. The lack of elaboration on topics like equality and liberty and the bare insight he gives to the modes best suited to achieve the people’s improvement seem to contradict his typically enlightened digression on the situation of the people of the Vanni at the beginning of his memoir. In that sense, Nagel and Van Senden differed in their attitude. Although Van Senden also stressed his superiority, he tried to involve the native headmen in his quest for agricultural improvement. Instead of sending a minister to the area to instruct the people on a parable on the “good tenant”, he planted a garden himself, to give an example for the inhabitants of the villages. And although he complained about the character of the inhabitants, he did not criticize their institutions, laws or religion.

5.6 An ideal image: the colonial ruler as humanitarian father

Despite their differences, Nagel’s rhetoric of legitimization and Van Senden’s vision of improvement strongly reflect the Dutch spirit of the time. In particular it must have appealed to the domestic Dutch sentiment as it is described by Angelie Sens: the ideal of civilizing the natives has much in common with the Dutch attitude towards slavery in the West Indies. Neither Van Senden nor Nagel proposed any real change in society or in native relations with the colonial government. However, they did feel that if people were treated better and educated properly, they

would work harder within the system and their lives would be improved. Christianity played a supporting, but not a central role in this notion. The image of the colonial situation on Ceylon matched that in the West Indies: the view of the inhabitants as children and the colonial official as father to rule over them is strong in both documents and resembles the Dutch contemporary attitude towards slavery. It was an ideal image and one that both Nagel and Van Senden undoubtedly emphasized to please their superiors, convince them of the necessity of their work and thereby further their own careers. After all, both documents were not only sent to the governor, but also to Batavia and the Netherlands.

Despite the tyranny of distance, Van Senden and Nagel were both influenced by the contemporary Dutch world view, and the empathy they expressed for the natives was part of this ideology. How sincere were these two men? As colonial officials they undoubtedly stressed the difference in the degree of civilization between them and the local people, but their reports must have sounded plausible for the intended audience. After all, these memoranda were not written for an audience in Europe, but first of all for the highest VOC officials in Asia, who had to decide their policy upon such information and who had their own first-hand experience of indigenous Asian people. Van Senden and Nagel were conscious that the governor and the members of the High Government in Batavia would read their pieces. With a view on their career perspectives it was not a bad idea to put oneself to the best advantage by revealing a thorough-going image of themselves. Still, the image they sketched of the inhabitants must have been acceptable for their contemporaries on Ceylon and elsewhere in Asia.

Perhaps what binds the two most is their model of the vigorous Company official, who ruled over his subjects in a just, paternalistic manner. Both men approached the natives in terms of character and nature that could be improved and not in terms of social structures that should be amended. A long-term vision of this improvement is absent. It is instructive to place the two memoranda in the perspective of that of his contemporary Jacob Burnand.

5.7 Jacob Burnand's practical reflections

Burnand's rhetoric was somewhat different from that of Nagel and Van Senden. Most notable, Burnand did not describe his subject in the same expressions on the stages of development. In part, this can be explained by the nature of the document, which was written as a guideline for his successor as head of the Batticaloa district. At the same time Burnand based his line of reasoning on two characteristic assumptions, which are

also found in Nagel's memorandum. These are the idea of arrested development owing to arbitrary rule by despotic headmen, and a belief in progress of society.

The first can be illustrated by his representation of the history of the district and its re-occupation by the Dutch in 1766. Burnand's story-line goes as follows: a long time ago, before the first arrival of the Portuguese, the region was doing very well. It was populous and agriculture was flourishing. It was unclear when the area came under Kandyan rule. However, after this happened, the country was ruined, people fled, leaving only a few *vedahs* behind and farmland turned into jungle again.³⁴⁴ It was under the Kandyan Kingdom that the *Mukuvan* families, migrating from Jaffna and allying themselves with the king, became the powerful elite of the area. Every layer of the Kandyan administration, from the Kandyan *dessava* of the whole district downwards to the village headmen, extorted and vexed the poor inhabitants. Nobody's property was secure and people ran up great debts.³⁴⁵ The short period of Portuguese and Dutch occupation of the district in the seventeenth century produced no change for the better. Matters grew so bad that when the Dutch war against the King of Kandy began, the *Mukuvan* and all the inhabitants offered their allegiance to the Dutch. This resulted in the *Deed of submission* signed on 14 October 1766.³⁴⁶ Burnand's interpretation of the history of the district leads him to conclude that the legitimacy of Dutch rule over the district was twofold: the land had been obtained both by conquest and also by the invitation of the people. The latter implied a moral duty on the part of the Company.

Here Burnand started to deviate from Nagel's discourse. He felt that the policy of increasing the paddy revenue for the Company could be defined only within the opportunities offered in the deed of submission on the one hand, and should fulfil the moral obligation to bring back the flourishing times to the district on the other hand. These two elements of his policy did not clash, but were in fact related to each other:

There is however [stated] in the aforementioned act of submission that without transgressing those bounds or without forsaking justice and introducing arbitrarily new taxes, the revenues of government in those districts may successively be extended much more from time to time according to the encrease of the population, the cultivation and the manufacture of cloth.³⁴⁷

Burnand strongly believed that the existing system of government belonged to the district, and that it was not up to the Company to make any basic alterations. This system had once brought it to a flourishing state, and it was only through the corruption of the Kandyan court and the *Mukuvan* headmen that the district had been brought to ruin. The last argument legitimized his marginalizing policies towards the *hoofdpedies* and also explains the rationalization of the taxes and services. In his

view, he did not change the system, but only improved it. He was of the opinion that changes to the system, if necessary sometimes, had to be implemented slowly and carefully at the right time.

The second characteristic assumption is exemplified by his attitude towards the inhabitants of the district. This appears to be negative at first: a typical picture was sketched of lazy, indifferent and indolent people. Burnand stressed however, that this was solely the result of the fraudulent and oppressive behaviour of the headmen. Like Nagel and Van Senden he believed in the effectiveness of social engineering. He was certain that their behaviour would improve dramatically once they were governed rightly. In this way, he was sure, the “natural indifference” and the “laziness of the natives” could be “conquered”.³⁴⁸ They just needed to experience the fruits of the new policies and according to him many already had: “The petty pedies / inferior headmen / and common people are in general more attentive in performing their duties and more manageable, which is to be ascribed [attributed] to the real amendment of their state effected by the new changes.”³⁴⁹ In this argument he went further than Nagel, because he not only provided examples of people who had already changed their behaviour, but he also summed up the measures that led to this change. Security of property through fair administration of justice and free trade proved to be major catalysts for improvement. He demonstrated, not without pride, that under his government this was all possible, and he used as an example the fact that there was no need anymore for people to sell their children as slaves out of poverty. He found another proof in the decreased crime rate during his administration.

He saw it as his obligation to bring “just rule” to the people, but only within their own system and based on their own laws and customs. The means to stimulate people to produce more were limited to economic and political impulses: stability and security were the magic words. If managed properly this would lead to a material and spiritual improvement of the people. Nowhere does he talk about a civilizing mission as such in the memoir.³⁵⁰

Although Burnand does not emphasize the contrast between primitive native and superior Dutchman as Van Senden and Nagel do, the other elements are still present and even more extensively discussed by him. Burnand sincerely believed in the progress of society and the vocation of the colonial official to pursue this. After all it would lead to a prosperous country, with happy subjects, and an increase in income for the Company, in part because of the growth of the Ceylonese market for Company trade goods. Since Burnand, Nagel, and Van Senden all worked closely with the governor, there is no reason why his basic assumptions of the colonial relations would have been fundamentally different.

However, there were differences in the practical realization of the ideal policy. While in the Vanni and in Batticaloa this was to be achieved by replacing the headmen who were held responsible for the stagnation, in the southwest it led to a policy of containing the headmen. The 'tyrannical headmen' form a leitmotif in colonial thought almost from the beginning of Dutch involvement with Asian societies and in one of his articles, Jurrien van Goor identified this as the central phenomenon in Dutch colonial ideology.³⁵¹

What is of interest here is that the place of the headmen in the Dutch colonial discourse changed over time. Early on, they were viewed as competitors, working against the interests of the Company. In the 1750s especially they were accused of clearing plots of land on which the cinnamon tree grew and planting it with coconuts, which was not a product of much use to the Company. In case of taxation, the headmen were withholding information and goods and not paying the full taxes to the Company. For this they were sometimes reprimanded by the Company. The element of competition for resources, be it land, labour, or produce, always remained a major factor in the relationship between the Company and the headmen, but by the 1780s Dutch attitudes had shifted. The headmen were now considered despotic because they did not put any energy into improving the agriculture of the island, and thereby hampered the development of their subjects. They were now blamed for the backwardness of the society. The discourse regarding the headmen adapted to the needs and the mindset of the Company government and in this period, it was the drive towards a fully self sufficient economy.

The two strategies observed in the eastern and in the southwestern regions seem to be contradictory. In the east, the headmen were dispensed with and Company officials strove for the improvement of the common man while in the southwest, policy was aimed at improving the headmen themselves. However, it has to be remembered that in general the improvement of the people was related more to their moral improvement and that of their attitude towards work than to their social position towards the Company or the headmen. In the view of the Dutch, there was no problematic contradiction between the two schemes, because of an important omission from their discourse, namely the issues of liberty and equality.

5.8 Conclusion

At the beginning of this chapter I wondered whether the remarks made by Jacob Burnand in 1809 – that the last Dutch governors were enlightened administrators – was significant or supportable. We saw that the

economic policies, to better exploit the interior land and to improve the island's agricultural situation fitted contemporary ideals about economic policy. The language used to describe the native society also bears resemblance to contemporary European publications. However, in comparison to the moral-political elements of the Enlightenment, the Dutch administrators do not make a particular "enlightened" impression.

As we saw, in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Van de Graaff, Nagel, Burnand, and Van Senden hardly touched upon the concepts of liberty and equality, two very important concepts in the political enlightenment of the eighteenth century. Burnand and Van Senden did however show a bit more empathy than Nagel. Burnand accepted slavery and bonded labour as part of normal life, yet he understood that people did not prefer to be subjugated in this manner. In his view both were necessary to overcome the lack of labour in Ceylon. Even though he recognized the possibility to pay a tax instead of performing the services as a positive development for the people and the economy, he emphasized that in some cases the labour was just too indispensable and the payment of redemption money was therefore not always acceptable. In fact he pointed out that the more people started redeeming their services, the more the Company would have to rely on slave labour for coolie work. Slaves who had obtained some wealth should however naturally be in the position to buy their freedom. For the rest, control and protection from abuse by a good ruler, were more important. It is the argument that Van de Graaff always used when there were complaints against possible abuse by the headmen.³⁵²

The development plans reflect in many ways a typically Dutch attitude: the Dutch enlightenment had a strong traditional Christian component and when civil society, in the form of "academic" societies, expressed its concern for the natives of the colonies it was usually in the context of the mission and its role in native societies. All forced labour, be it in the form of slavery or bonded labour, was acceptable, as long as the people were treated well. In the view of the Dutch, progress was not related to the structural relations in society, but to virtuous behaviour: harmony and industry were its major elements. This persistent attitude towards non-western societies reminds of that of the official policies of colonial Java in the same period, which eventually led to the acceptance of the system of forced cultivation (*Cultuurstelsel*) as major system of exploitation.³⁵³ In all, what Burnand meant when he described the Dutch as enlightened administrators in 1809, had probably more to do with the then-current debate over good rule than with the actual administration of the Dutch.