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

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PART THREE
THE SECOND COLONIAL TRANSITION:
IMPERIAL DESIGN AND LOCAL PRACTICE

INTRODUCTION

In his “Fragments on Ceylon”, which was probably commissioned by Governor Thomas Maitland (1805-1811), Jacob Burnand compared Dutch and British policies and their effects on the island’s society and economy.³⁹⁹ He dealt with the main facets of inland administration, namely the agriculture and the administration of the island’s revenues and expressed an extremely low regard for the early British government. He actually suggested that the people had been better off under the Dutch:

Ceylon, having changed its masters in the years 1795 and 1796, a total subversion in the system of its government took place; and this subversion, in spite of the many advantages possessed by the English Company of introducing improvements, has had a deplorable effect on the agriculture, and consequently on the bulk of the people.⁴⁰⁰

He referred here in particular to the policies of the Revenue Commissioner Robert Andrews in 1796 and 1797 and those of Governor Frederick North between 1798 and 1805. Further down, he put across more explicitly the devastating effects of then new regime: “In a word, the inhabitants of the country have retrograded from the civilization and dependance in which they formerly lived, into a degeneracy that may be attended with the most deplorable consequences.”⁴⁰¹

The following chapters discuss the problem of how the British dealt with the Dutch legacy and how they shaped their own government in the period between 1796 and 1815. This question is more complicated than it may seem at first. Historians have found it difficult to draw a systematic picture of this transitional period of British rule which saw the formation of four different governments in fifteen years. Each had its own particular way of dealing with the Dutch legacy and with that of their British predecessors on the island. Jacob Burnand’s observation, quoted above, lifts a corner of the veil: as we shall see, the first government distanced itself as much as possible from the Dutch regime, whereas the last proclaimed to stay as close to the Dutch system of government as possible. On the surface, this suggests that the outcome of the transition to British rule was nothing more than a change of officials at the highest level and that the precedents established during Dutch rule continued after a short upheaval. This is the customary picture of Ceylon in this period, but modern insights into the processes of regime change suggest a more complex outcome of the period of transition.

It is clear that the British met great difficulty in setting up the new government on the island and it would be more than ten years before the

government was on a more or less stable footing. Regime changes have become a popular subject of study among political scientists in recent decades. Such studies discuss certain recurring patterns that are found in contemporary changes of regime, and on this basis they have attempted to develop models to understand regime change. Of course such models do not prescribe actual outcomes, but they do show how particular elements tend to reappear. Very broadly, the process of regime change can be summarized as follows: at the beginning of a transitional period, the new people in charge usually express a strong sense of change and progress and feel that society and government are malleable and susceptible to reform. A discontinuity with the former regime is desired and consequently all elements that remind of the old regime are done away with. Old elites lose their power and have to make place for new power groups. This initial phase is usually followed by one of rapprochement and exploration and in which the interests of all power-groups are considered. The end of the period is characterized by consolidation, crystallization and stabilization, which often implies a renewed esteem for the situation prior to the period of change and even a desire to return to the *status quo ante*. By this time a new system has come in to being, in which new elements are merged with the old ones.⁴⁰²

We will examine the political developments that took place under the first British governors against the background of those that took place in the final decades of Dutch rule on Ceylon. Chapter Seven deals with the regime of Robert Andrews and General James Stuart, under the supervision of the government of Madras. Chapter Eight deals with the government of Governor Frederick North under the shared supervision of the governor-general and the Crown. Chapter Nine deals with the government of Thomas Maitland who ruled entirely in name of the Crown. The main points of analysis will be, respectively, the relationship between the government on the island and its superiors in England and India; the institutional composition of the British administration, its relationship with local power-groups and their function within the administrative organization; and finally a closer look at the revenue and agricultural policy.

We have seen that a particular Dutch vision of native society and of the Dutch as a colonial power played a role in the implementation of the new policies. To understand the level of continuity and change between Dutch and British policies, the background to the British policies are taken into account in Chapter Ten. Chapter Eleven continues the story of Kandy and places its dramatic end in 1815 in the perspective of the developments in Dutch times, discussed in the previous chapter.

CHAPTER SEVEN

REGIME CHANGE AND TRANSITIONAL POLITICS
(1795-1798)*7.1 The incorporation of Dutch Ceylon in the British Empire*

In South Asia, the second part of the eighteenth century was characterized by continuous British expansion and infiltration throughout the Indian subcontinent at the cost of both indigenous states and rival European trading companies. The disintegration of the Moghul Empire, the conclusion of alliances with local princes and the French competition drew the British deep into the subcontinent. During the Mysore Wars in the 1780s and 1790s, British attention was drawn towards the eastern Ceylonese harbour of Trincomalee, the main attraction of which was its strategic and sheltered location close to both the Coromandel and Malabar coasts. It was possible to sail from there in both monsoons and therefore it could function well as a central base for activities in those regions. That is why in 1782, midway through the Fourth Anglo-Dutch War, the British decided to occupy Trincomalee. To their disappointment, this occupation did not last long because the French, who were then allied with the Dutch, captured it within the year and returned it to the Dutch after the conclusion of the war in 1784.⁴⁰³

The eventual British conquest of the Dutch possessions on Ceylon in 1796 was linked to international political events in Europe and in Asia. When early in 1795 the French conquered and occupied the Netherlands, the British feared a French annexation of Dutch possessions in Asia, which in turn would enhance France's competitive position. The Dutch stadtholder William V, who had fled his country to take refuge with king George III in Kew, had similar concerns about French activities in Asia. Hoping to gain British support to retain the Dutch possessions in Asia, he asked the British to protect these against the French. These requests were addressed to the George III and are now usually referred to as the Kew Letters.⁴⁰⁴ The British responded instantly to his appeal and this had repercussions for Ceylon among other Dutch possessions. Within two days after the reception of the Kew Letters, instructions were sent to the governors of Madras and Bengal, where they arrived in June 1795. The situation in South India continued to be pressing, because the wars with Mysore were far from over and the French had by then tactically allied themselves with Mysore's new sultan, Tipu. The British could not run the

risk that Ceylon with its strategic port at Trincomalee might fall in French hands.⁴⁰⁵

Immediately after they received the information about the Kew Letters, the commanders in Madras took action. They sent a letter to the Dutch government in Colombo to inform them about the Kew Letters and proposed to bring Ceylon under the protection of the British army. Without waiting for a reply, they sent out a fleet under the command of General Stuart to occupy Trincomalee. The much desired harbour was conquered in July 1795, but it took another seven months before the remaining Dutch territory was taken over. From the beginning there had been confusion over the concept of “protection” in the negotiations with the Governor Van Angelbeek. In the Dutch view, protection meant the temporary stationing of a British garrison on the island, while in the British view it implied a temporary occupation of the Dutch possessions.

The British annexation of Ceylon certainly does not match the concept of reluctant or “absent-minded” imperialism often used to explain the British expansion in this period. It was in fact a conscious strategic step initiated in England and smoothly adopted in India. From the beginning the British had set their mind on using the Kew Letters to conquer Ceylon. The letters of the Scottish professor Hugh Cleghorn to the Secretary of War Henry Dundas and the scheme he proposed to reach this goal bear witness to this. Cleghorn suggested persuading the Count de Meuron, the Swiss commander of the most important mercenary regiment on the island of Ceylon, to switch to British service. He proposed it as follows: “Whether Britain shall be under necessity of declaring *war* against Holland, or whether she may be only induced to *seize* the Dutch possessions for the stadholder, the advantages which much arise from detaching his regiment from the service of the republick or [Dutch] East India Company are equally obvious.”⁴⁰⁶ Dundas’ answer to Cleghorn’s suggestion was positive, and Cleghorn was asked to execute the plan as quickly as possible. Indeed, from Dundas’ further correspondence with Cleghorn and with the officials in Madras, it is clear that he was consciously aiming at the annexation of Ceylon. In response to a letter written by General Stuart on the tenth of September 1795, which reported of the conquest of Trincomalee, he wrote anxiously:

The judgement and discretion which have marked your conduct both in the political negotiations and the military operations undertaken by you in the island of Ceylon, and the uninterrupted success with which it has been attended, lead me to indulge in the daily expectation of hearing that the town and settlement of Columbo [sic] together with the remaining possessions of the Dutch in that island, have been added to the valuable acquisitions already made there.⁴⁰⁷

In September 1795, British troops marched up from Trincomalee to Jaffna and soon they headed for Colombo. It was not a campaign to be proud of, with the troops behaving badly in the field which resulted in the inhabitants of the island anxiously fleeing at their approach.⁴⁰⁸ Consequently, Stuart wrote in an reproving tone to Major Dalrymple in Jaffna: "I hope it is unnecessary for me to mention that I expect the strictest discipline will be observed among the troops under your command, in order to check the licentiousness and irregularities, which I am sorry to be forced to remark, have too often occurred amongst our troops since they first landed on the island of Ceylon."⁴⁰⁹

The withdrawal of De Meuron's troops was settled in October and this seriously weakened the Dutch defence of the capital Colombo, where five hundred of the eight hundred men of his regiment had been garrisoned. After that operation was executed successfully, Cleghorn informed Dundas that "I have this moment received information on which I can rely that governor Van Angelbeck is resolved not to hazard the effects of a siege and is determined when a British force appears before Columbo, to prevent by capitulation the consequence of an assault."⁴¹⁰

7.2 *The capitulation of Colombo*

Indeed, the Dutch officials in Colombo were now put in a situation, with their defence seriously weakened. The minutes of the political council of those last months show how the governor and council were put into a corner. Their defences, which had not been in a good state anyway, were now seriously hampered by the withdrawal of De Meuron's regiment. Moreover, their reserves were running out and no supplies were coming from abroad. They could not call in the help of the court of Kandy, because of the diplomatic impasse with that power and in fact the Kandyans had sought contact with the British. The final decision to capitulate was not made by the governor alone, but by the whole council after the staff officers were consulted on their opinion. The question of capitulation was a delicate matter, and the governor made sure he safeguarded himself against any critique or slander by inserting the opinion of all staff officers and members of the council. In the council minutes of 15 February 1796, a day before the actual capitulation, the consideration of all members of the political council and those of the staff officers were reproduced. Even Pieter Sluijsken, then commander of Surat who was staying over on the island, was asked for his opinion. With the British at their doorstep of Colombo, all but one (Major Vaugine) voted for capitulation.⁴¹¹

Despite Van Angelbeek's precautions, his reputation was seriously damaged by the capitulation.⁴¹² In a letter to his son in law and predecessor

Willem Jacob van de Graaff he expressed his concerns and his hope that Van de Graaff did not believe the allegations:

That Colombo surrendered by capitulation without any resistance must certainly surprise you, especially since I have no doubt that some persons may have written from here to Mauritius that the place could have been defended; this is a gossip which has spread all over, both here and in Coromandel. It will become clear that I have done from the beginning until the last day what is, in such circumstances, to be expected from an alert governor.⁴¹³

The allegations against Van Angelbeek were twofold. On the one hand, it was said that he would have withstood the British if he had only called in the help of the Kandyans and in return given in to some of their demands. Second, it was said that Van Angelbeek cared more for his private property on the island than for the Company's interests. The question of whether these allegations were correct must remain unanswered here. Regardless, the British force was much larger and in other respects in a good position to conquer Colombo, and its commanders were prepared to do so even if the Dutch had chosen not to capitulate straight away.

The articles of capitulation dealt with a wide range of matters: the dismantling of the military forces; the security of private property and finances; the continuity of clerical and charitable institutions; the right of civil and military servants of the Company to remain on the island if they so desired; and the continuation in office of the native headmen and servants. The Dutch officials' attachment to the island found expression in these articles, and they were clearly not without hope that Ceylon would eventually return to the Dutch. This hope lasted until 1802, when at the Peace of Amiens Ceylon was ceded permanently to Britain. Until that time, many of the Dutchmen on Ceylon, in Batavia and in the Netherlands assumed that Ceylon would revert to the Netherlands after the war.⁴¹⁴

As early as 1797 rumours were spreading that Van de Graaff was coming with French assistance from Mauritius (Île de France)⁴¹⁵ and on 31 March the High Government in Batavia discussed what instruction to send to Ceylon after its return.⁴¹⁶ At the same time, during the peace negotiations at Paris in 1796 and in Lille the next year, it was clear that the British were determined to keep their new possession. The island was considered to be of too great strategic importance to give it up, Trincomalee had to stay out of French hands, and plans were developed to turn the port into a maritime base for Britain's Asian possessions. At this point peace was not concluded, and many still regarded Dutch Ceylon as occupied territory rather than a permanent British possession.⁴¹⁷ The new government of coastal Ceylon had to cope with this uncertain status, as well as with the restless hopes of the Dutch who stayed behind.

7.3 1795-1797, *coconuts and dubashes*

The first period of British rule on the island is a little obscure. It took six months before all the Dutch possessions on the island were occupied by the British. Trincomalee was taken in July 1795 and Jaffna in September when it was placed under the military command of Major Dalrymple. From the establishment of British civil and military authority under General Stuart in February 1796, the connection with the government of Madras remained very strong, and all decisions had to be sent there for Governor Hobart's approval.

For Stuart, the Dutch inhabitants remaining on the island were a major point of concern. They continuously asked for financial assistance but at the same time refused to take the oath of allegiance to the British Crown and to work for the British.⁴¹⁸ Serious trouble arose from the fact that the Dutch magistrates refused to sit in the courts or hear cases, which paralysed the whole judicial system and caused enormous delays. Stuart also reported upon the correspondence with Kandy, which went less smoothly than expected because the Kandyans turned out not to be the loyal neighbours the British had expected.⁴¹⁹ Military matters concerned the distribution of Ceylonese booty among the troops, maintaining order in the country and transporting of auxiliary troops back to the subcontinent where they were needed in the war against Tipu Sultan.⁴²⁰

Although the British had occupied Ceylon chiefly for geostrategic reasons, the government of Madras also had high expectations regarding the wealth of the island and expected it to yield much revenue. Robert Andrews, who had earlier been involved in secret missions to Kandy, was appointed as permanent ambassador to Kandy in October 1795 and at the same time put in charge of the revenue department of the conquered territories.⁴²¹ Therefore it was he who formulated the inland policies and he, like Stuart, corresponded directly with the government in Madras.⁴²² In practice, Andrews basically determined the inland policies on his own and informed Stuart, his superior, only sporadically on his measures. At first, he had two assistants at his disposal: John Jervis was put in charge of Jaffna, and Robert Alexander was put in charge of Galle and Colombo. Later, a third assistant, Garrow, was added for Trincomalee and Batticaloa.

At first the island's revenue was enormous, just as the Madras government had hoped. It was derived from two products: the pearl fishery and the cinnamon. Andrews had turned to the pearl fisheries of Manaar as soon as the region was conquered. The pearl fishery had been dormant more than forty years but after inspection, the pearl banks were found to be ready for fishing and these were an immediate source of revenue: with in two years they yielded £265,000 for the East India Company (EIC).⁴²³

As was customary, the pearl fishery was farmed out to the highest bidder. It was a large operation, and there were many irregularities and a lot of fraud. The fishing grounds had suffered from over-fishing in the early eighteenth century, but the fishery had also been affected by diplomatic crises with the nabob of Arcot and the Rajah of Tanjore both of whom claimed a right to part of the fishery. This conflict had kept the Dutch from fishing for many years. By the 1790s, the crisis had been overcome and a new contract had been made with the nabob. The pearl banks had been inspected regularly, and the Dutch government had finally planned a fishing campaign for 1796 – the first year of the British occupation.⁴²⁴

The second major sources of revenue in the first year were the stocks of cinnamon left in the Dutch warehouses and loaded aboard ships that had been ready to sail – almost 9,000 bales (more than 700,000 lb), a two years' supply for the European market. This earned a lot of money in Europe.⁴²⁵ But the British wrongly assumed that the cinnamon was both abundant and easily harvested on the plantations. Joseph Greenhill, the EIC's commercial resident on the island, was appointed as superintendent of the cinnamon plantations. He did not receive any help or information from the Dutch inhabitants about the management of the cinnamon plantations and the private gardens, and as a result the plantations were seriously neglected, which was to have its repercussions later on.⁴²⁶

Based on his experience in India, where land taxes formed the basis of the colonial revenue, Andrews also expected a lot from the inland-revenue. With his three assistants from Madras, he set up the inland-revenue department and decided to reform both the system of taxation and the function of the inland headmen. As Burnand stated in his "fragments",⁴²⁷ discussed at the introduction to Part Three of this book, Andrew's steps were drastic and disastrous for the EIC. He did away with the import and export duties and the *oeliam* services, and abolished the service tenures in the Sinhalese districts where he taxed the inhabitants for the jak- and coconut-trees in their gardens. In the case of the coconut trees he determined that taxes were to be paid only by those who had more than fifty trees in their garden. He also dismissed all the native headmen, and instead employed *aumildars* or *dubashes* from Madras.⁴²⁸ They were in charge of the administration of justice and were to control the fields and gardens; the new tax-farms were rented out to the highest bidders.

The replacement of native headmen with *aumildars* was common practice when the British expanded their power in new regions, but it seems that Andrews did not realize that he was dealing here with a very different situation from that with which he was familiar. Before he took up his appointment, he had not been well informed about the situation on the island and his experiences were limited to Jaffna, which was in many

respects quite different from the southwest of the island.⁴²⁹ Furthermore, Andrews' plans regarding the coconut trees bear a great resemblance to the measures proposed by Martinus Mekern a year earlier, and this could be no coincidence.⁴³⁰ Although there is no direct proof, it seems likely that Andrews was influenced by the ongoing discussions in Jaffna regarding the capitation taxes and the tax on coconut tree. Certainly, there was communication between the British and the Dutch in Jaffna, and Andrews had good contact with Bartholomeus Raket's successor and son, Martinus Raket.⁴³¹ This places the measures of Andrews in a new light. That Andrews implemented the plans island-wide, without regard to local differences is another issue. As shall be seen in the next part, Andrews wasn't the only person who ignorantly transplanted Dutch plans and policies from one region to another.

Andrews explained and promoted his plans in his correspondence with Madras. His decision to abolish the import and export duties and the *oeliam* services were taken to stimulate trade to and from the island. The new taxes on the coconut trees were in his opinion much fairer than the old service tenures because the burden would now lie largely on the shoulders of the native headmen and the Dutch inhabitants who owned large coconut plantations in the regions surrounding Colombo and Galle. He emphasized that he tried to alleviate the lot of the common man and did not conceal that his measures were mainly taken against the old administrative elite.⁴³²

The whole face of the country is covered with luxuriant plantations of cocoanut trees the property of the Dutch or rich natives from which no revenue is collected, and while they are left to enjoy their profits and live in idleness and luxury, the lower order of people are in little less than a state of slavery.⁴³³

Of course the replacement of the *mudaliyārs* by *aumildars* from Madras was another measure designed to curb the power of the native headmen. The move was made in the summer of 1796 and was to be put into effect from the administrative year that commenced in August.

This policy has been the subject of much debate because it led to a large-scale rebellion on the island which forced the governor of Madras to visit the island in an effort to calm the situation. The revolt had not come entirely as a surprise and Stuart for one had predicted it when Andrews began his program. He had therefore advised the government of Madras not to withdraw all their troops until the new system was fully implemented.

The Moodeliers and headmen are likely to lose many advantages, and to suffer in their consequence by the change: they may therefore be expected to make some struggles to oppose arrangements which will operate so powerfully against their individual interests, and they will most probably have suf-

ficient influence to excite the inhabitants to revolt, while the latter remain ignorant that their advantage will be promoted by the new system, although the moodeliars suffer [...].⁴³⁴

The government in Madras was not much concerned with the effects of the changes in the headmen system. The members of government did not really care about the new taxes imposed. However, they disagreed on the abolishment of the service tenures, the *oeliam* taxes and the trade duties and cautioned Andrews about it. Also, they were afraid that the British government would lose control over the trade on the island and thus they would lose revenue.⁴³⁵

Various petitions against the system were sent by former Governor Van Angelbeek and other prominent Dutch inhabitants to Major General Welbore Ellis Doyle, who succeeded Stuart on 1 January 1797, and directly to the governments of Madras and Bengal. The Dutch were especially opposed to the coconut tree tax which they considered injudicious. Although meant to affect only the richer inhabitants, they actually hurt the poorer because coconut was an important source of food supply for many. Coconuts yielded high prices around Colombo, but this was not the case in areas further away from the roads and markets. In addition, the tax was too high because not all trees bore the same amount of coconuts. The Dutch also complained that Andrews had represented the Moors as poor people as an excuse to abolish the *oeliam* services; but as a rule they were not poor and the *oeliam* services were not a burden.⁴³⁶ At first the petitions were ignored on the assumption that they were written only to secure the interests of Dutch inhabitants.⁴³⁷ However, within half a year the whole country was in a revolt and by the end of April 1797 Major General Doyle was at his wit's end. He eventually wrote to Madras an alarming letter stating that he no alternative but to abolish the coconut tax, but strangely enough Madras made Doyle continue the taxes.⁴³⁸ In the meantime, it was decided to establish a committee to look into the island's revenues and the proper management and policy that should be followed. The committee was headed by Colonel de Meuron, assisted by Robert Andrews and Major Agnew. When Doyle died on 11 July, Hobart appointed De Meuron to succeed him.⁴³⁹

7.4 *The Dutch approach revisited*

The most informative sources for De Meuron's government are the minutes of his "Committee for Investigating the state of the revenue, and other important matters on the island of Ceylon". These give additional insight into the rebellion and the problems that instigated it. Hobart had given the committee some guidelines in an extensive minute dated 9 June

1797, and expected a full report from the committee.⁴⁴⁰ The coconut tree taxation was temporary suspended in August 1797, after instructions from Hobart in order to quell the rebellion.⁴⁴¹ The other major problems to be resolved were whether to return to the former headmen system and what to do with the service lands. De Meuron took his job very seriously and made an intensive investigation in the papers of the Dutch government to analyse their sources of revenue and how its collection was organized.⁴⁴² In the meantime, the rebellion was ongoing, now directed against the Malabari renters, or *dubashes*, who not only functioned as tax collectors but also held juridical authority in the districts. The three members of the committee, De Meuron, Andrews, and Agnew, did not entirely concur in their ideas on these matters and were still debating the matter and sending proposals to Madras when the revolt reached its climax in November and December 1797.⁴⁴³

It was at this time that the story circulated that former Governor Van de Graaff was approaching the island with a French fleet from the island of Mauritius.⁴⁴⁴ Many Dutch inhabitants now openly chose to side with the native headmen and even the Kandyan prime minister started to meddle. This potential union of forces made the rebellion most threatening for the British. De Meuron sent alarming letters to Hobart, informing him that the rebellion was growing out of proportion and requesting orders for how to deal with the situation. Hobart took these developments very seriously and decided to move to the island to oversee the situation in person. This decision was, it seems, inspired more by the news that the Dutch and the French were working together with Kandy against the British, than by the ongoing revolt against the new revenue system itself. However, while he was there he realized that these issues were connected and informed himself on the situation in conversations with the committee of investigation. Subsequently, he wrote an extensive minute in which he represented the sources of tension and proposed his solutions.⁴⁴⁵

It was not to be supposed that the Moodeliars, alarmed by these measures for their influence over the people, would be active in suppressing the dissatisfaction which the assumption of the service lands and the introduction of the coast system of revenue had generated—the intrigues of the Dutch, an expected French force and an injudicious tax on the cocoanut tree, increased the ferment, whose consequences we have seen in those insurrections.⁴⁴⁶

In this minute Hobart was careful to draw a distinction between the situation in parts of the subcontinent and in Ceylon. His conclusion is fundamental to understanding the course he recommended to be taken next.

The great source of revenue upon the coast differs essentially from that upon Ceylon—upon the coast, grain constitutes the primary source of revenue, in Ceylon it is secondary to almost every other article of taxation. So insignifi-

cant indeed is the government share of that produce, that, if it were necessary for the attainment of the public tranquillity, and the easy collection of the other taxes, I should have little hesitation in advising its relinquishment altogether under an assumption of the service lands, [otherwise] this produce would certainly increase, but not in proportion to the expenditure which must be then incurred for official servants and daily labourers.⁴⁴⁷

These considerations eventually led to the decision that the service tenures had to be reinstated and that the *mudaliyārs* had to be invested again with their former authority.

In the end, Hobart's suggestions were adopted. It was decided that for the time being the British government should return to the former Dutch system of government, this implied a definite abolition of the coconut-taxes and a restoration of the power of the *mudaliyārs*. The custom duties and the *oeliam* services were also reinstated. This was a radical switch, and according to some men, like Burnand, it was done too easily. According to these people the question of who was at fault for the underlying causes of the rebellion required more intensive investigation, before moving on. The task of the committee appointed by Hobart had been to advise on the best mode of governing the country in order to yield the most revenue and although they looked into some specific complaints, no one was put on trial. Later in 1799, Davy Robertson who was sent to London to inform the secretary of state Dundas on the situation on the island, criticized the committee's approach:

As the Malabar and Madras Dubashes were accused by the vellales and other inhabitants of having been guilty during the time that they were employed in the revenue department of the most gross abuses and as they, whilst they denied the crimes, as loudly recriminated, on the Vellales; these charges ought to have been fully examined and enquired into, the guilty ought to have been publicly punished and the innocent persons rewarded and confided in for the future, whereas now whether these peculations and abuses that were certainly practised, were committed by the Malabars or Vellales, must ever remain uncertain....⁴⁴⁸

Probably this did not happen because the government in Colombo feared another revolt if they investigated the crimes of the *mudaliyārs* themselves. There were many rumours that the latter had been as much involved in the extortion of the people as the *dubashes*, since many of them had actually taken up tax-farms besides the *dubashes*. Because of this cover up, the whole episode has remained rather obscure.⁴⁴⁹

7.5 Regime change and collaboration

The British government had had a problematic start on the island and the

new regime of Stuart and Andrews suffered from a “regime-change-syndrome” as described in the introduction of part three of this thesis. Both Andrews and the government of Madras felt that as new overlords, they were in a position to do as they wished on the island. Andrews absolutely did not trust the native elite, nor the Dutch whom he considered his political enemies. Therefore he searched for new allies to govern the island according to his will, he called in the *dubashes* from Madras, and at the same time tried to tie the native merchant class to his interest by relieving them from the taxes, and the peasants by relieving them from their service-obligations. These new alliances failed for two reasons. First, Andrews did not have a proper understanding of the structures and needs of native society and second, Andrews underestimated the power the native elite had over the peasants.

By trial and error the British rulers learned of the strength of the local elites in the southwest of the island, and they came to realize that without them their government simply could not work. The collaboration of the native elite with some of the former Dutch officials and Kandyan ministers put too much pressure on the British and they had little choice but to give in to their demands. After the insurrection had quieted down, they were not in a position to persecute the powerful elites for their misbehaviour, because they were too dependent on them. There was an existing power structure on the island, which had a definite legitimacy in the eyes of the inhabitants, and the British had to come to terms with this and could not just ignore it. In the historical perspective of the Dutch period, this is no surprise: it has been pointed out in the last chapter that the bargaining power of the *mudaliyārs* was very strong and had been enhanced by the Dutch policies in the previous decades.

A question that will be answered in the next chapter is how Andrew's successors dealt with this situation and whether power relations on the island changed. At least the local power relations were much better understood by De Meuron. Hobart came to realize this during his visit and that is why he turned the clock back so decisively. In his view there was no other way without using force. The choice to return to the Dutch system and the search for stabilization fits in very well again with the regime change theories, but in this case it did not mark the final phase of the transitional period. Not all local relations had crystallized, nor was the island's destiny and function within the British empire decided. Thanks to changing international and local circumstances, the transitional situation would be prolonged for seven more years.