

The Dutch and the Elephants of Sri Lanka

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Abstract:

The Dutch occupation of the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka was to exploit the trade articles of the island, which then had a significant demand in the foreign market. Among such various items of trade, the elephants were one of the valuable commercial resources that the Dutch found in abundance in the territory of Sri Lanka. More over, the areas where elephant hunting was carried was within the Dutch territory in the island. The prevalent caste system too benefitted Dutch commercial aims regarding the capture of Sri Lankan elephants. Thus, people who performed various tasks with regard to "elephant dealings" continued also under the Dutch rule. The Dutch interest in Sri Lankan elephants will form the theme of this article.

Keywords: Dutch, elephants, trade

1. The Sri Lankan Elephants prior to Dutch Occupation:

In pre-colonial Sri Lanka, handling elephants was under the sole authority of the King. Various functions concerning elephants were assigned to the respective caste categories based on service tenure. The official known as the *Gajanâyaka Nilamç* was the Head of the Elephant Establishment of the King. There were numerous subordinate ranks in the Establishment such as *Panikki* to capture the elephants, *Kûruve* to look after the captured elephants and *Panna* to provide food for the captured elephants. The elephants were used for religious, ceremonial, working and war purposes, but as already mentioned it was strictly a royal prerogative (Nicholas 1954:156-158).

When the Portuguese captured the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka, they too got interested in Sri Lankan elephants. First they obtained the Sri Lankan elephants as a tribute and later on started capturing the elephants on their own. The Portuguese subsequently set up a revenue gathering unit called the Elephant Hunt, which was similar to that of the King's Elephant Establishment. They also adapted the local set up that was based on service tenure on the basis of caste to capture and deal with the Sri Lankan elephants. The social groups that were already specialized in particular tasks concerning "elephant dealings" were mobilized to meet the requirements connected with promotional activities of elephants as an item of trade. Hitherto the King had authority only on the wild elephants in the Kandyan Kingdom, where his royal permission was required if the elephants were to be captured from the respective lands (Nicholas 1954:156-158).