

Dutch Colonial Memories on Sri Lankan Elephants

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Introduction

In the history of Sri Lanka, it is reasonable to consider the period from 1640 to 1796 to be that of the Period of Dutch East India Company (DEIC)'s Occupation in the coastal region of the Island, and a part of the European colonial era in the history of Sri Lanka¹. During this period, the DEIC dispatched its officials to the Island to administer and regulate the affairs pertaining to the political, naval, military, judicial, religious, educational and artisan requirements and so on in the territory (Anthonisz, 1916, p.186 & Brohier, 2002, p.554)². Among the officials who were so dispatched, the Governor was the highest authority in the administration of territory³. The DEIC appointed more than twenty-five Governors to the Dutch Territory of Sri Lanka during its period of occupation in the coastal region of the Island (de Silva, 1981, pp.743-4).

Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka

The outgoing Governors of the Dutch Territory of Sri Lanka had written the memoirs explaining the political, economic and socio-cultural conditions in Sri Lanka during their tenure of office to make their successive Governors aware of the respective spheres. Possibly the main purpose of writing the memoirs by the outgoing Governors was to ensure the future circumstances of DEIC's occupation in the territory of Sri Lanka smooth and comfortable⁴.

However, those Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka are noteworthy archives that illustrate the political, economic and socio-cultural conditions in seventeenth and eighteenth century Sri Lanka. The credit should go to the Department of National Archives Sri Lanka for taking initiative to translate them from the Old Dutch into modern English and publish in a series devoted to the publication of Selections from the Dutch Records of Sri Lanka⁵. The Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka so translated and published immensely serve to non-Dutch speaking researchers who are particularly interested in political, economic and socio-cultural conditions in seventeenth and eighteenth century Sri Lanka.

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Sri Lankan Elephants as revealed through the Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of

Sri Lanka

The revelation of the elephants in Sri Lanka through the Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka delves into research ⁶. To what extent the Memoirs of the Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka can be used to tap the DEIC dealings in the context of the elephants of Sri Lanka? What assessment could be made on the DEIC trade in Sri Lankan elephants based on those mentions?

Contemporary sources such as of Baldaeus (1672), Valentijn (1726) and Heydt (1744) suggest the DEIC has had a commercial interest in elephants of Sri Lanka since its territorial foothold in the coastal region of the Island ⁷. By the mid-seventeenth century, the profits that the DEIC gained from the sources of income had already included the elephants of Sri Lanka (Valentijn, 1975, p.343). It is noted that in the subsequent period, the DEIC had designed even its fortifications to safeguard the monopoly of Sri Lankan elephants. For instance, a fort known as Elephant Pass was built at the gateway to the Jaffna Peninsular to be vigilant in order to protect the elephants herded to Jaffna to be shipped to India (Becker, 1914, p.3 & p.38). The DEIC kept the garrisons at important points to prevent unauthorized entry into the elephant hunting areas as well ⁸. For instance, Katuvana at the northern limit of Giruvā *pattu* in the Matara district could be mentioned. All these evidence suggest that the DEIC had paid special attention to the elephants of Sri Lanka as an important matter of fact. In the circumstances, the elephants of Sri Lanka became a remarkable source of concern among almost all Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka. Tracing the nature of Dutch Governors' concern on the elephants of Sri Lanka uncovers the DEIC dealings in respect of the same as well.

Irrespective of whether the memoirs are of the seventeenth or the eighteenth century Dutch Governors of Sri Lanka, almost all accounts have stated particulars with regard to the elephant dealings of the DEIC in Sri Lanka. All such mentions, could be broadly categorized into two main aspects: (i) hunting of elephants and (ii) sale of elephants. The two main aspects will contribute to the understanding of many more subsidiary aspects related to the elephants of Sri Lanka during the period of DEIC occupation in the coastal region of Sri Lanka such as the areas of hunting, the hunters, hunting seasons, method followed in hunting, transport of captured elephants, tributes, demand for certain elephants, public auctions of elephants and profit which the trade in elephants had yielded.

With regard to the hunting of elephants, the procedure had been in accordance with the caste services and land tenure set apart from ancient times. In respect of the service, the castes involved in elephant hunting possessed privileges, rights and holdings. For instance, the land grants by the DEIC ⁹(Maetsuyker, 1927, p.9 & 13). Towards the end of the seventeenth century, the DEIC had introduced an amazing concession which had similarly extended to all the hunters. Thomas van Rhee in his memoir indicates the means of reaching that decision: “..... may contribute much to an increase in the number of elephants delivered” (van Rhee, 1915, p.13). The DEIC had concerned to distribute the concession fairly in order to avoid even a single hunter being dissatisfied, which would cause damage to the DEIC's trade in elephants. The benefactions had included gold bracelets, silver bracelets, gold coins and cash prizes. Of these benefactions, the type or amount of the object given had been determined by the height and sex of the elephant(s) delivered to the DEIC. As has been indicated the male elephants

at a height of more than 2 meters had a high demand. Further, if there were tusks, more demanded. In comparison to the male elephants, the female elephants had had a less demand. No gold bracelets or gold coins were set apart in terms of female elephants even with tusks (van Rhee, 1915, pp.12-13).

It is noted that the DEIC was in continuation of the system of handling elephants prevalent prior to DEIC's occupation in Sri Lanka. Jan Schreuder (1757-62) refers to the *Gajanāyaka* (Chief of the Elephant Establishment), *Kūruwarāla* (Chief of the Elephant hunt), *Betmarāla* (Elephant Catcher), *Pantia Ārachchi* (Chief of the Elephants' Stable), *Baddena Ārachchi* (Elephant Catcher's Assistant) and *Mahapannikila* (Chief of the Elephant Drivers) (Schreuder, 1946, p.51). It is revealed that all the chiefs of the elephant hunt had been under obligation to deliver annually a certain number of elephants including a minimum number of tusked elephants as had been ordered by the DEIC from time to time. However, the lack of tamed elephants in order to bring away the captured wild beasts and thereafter to control them etc., had sometimes prevented the chiefs fulfilling the target number given by the DEIC (Maetsuyker, 1927, p.13).

The memoirs provide us with the information concerning the hunting seasons. The elephant hunting had been carried out at least once a year. The season which was usually selected for such hunting was from July to September (Maetsuyker, 1927, p.13). However, three hunts had been held in Colombo during the period of Baron van Imhoff's administration (1736-39) of which he was in view that a one hunt a year would be sufficient in that district as the DEIC received a fair number of elephants from the other areas of the territory as well (van Imhoff, 1911, pp.37-38).

The way in which the DEIC procured the elephants is yet another matter that is imparted. The elephants had been captured in a *kraal* which was an elaborate and specialized procedure¹⁰ (van Gollennesse, 1974, p.27). The *kraals* had usually taken place in the Colombo and Matara districts (Maetsuyker, 9). Thomas van Rhee (1693-97) describes the method followed with nooses made of deer skin or by means of pits during his term of office (van Rhee, 1915, p.13). However, this method had been banned by Hendrik Becker (1707-16) during his term of office. According to him, "..... the use of pits and nooses,injure the animals" (Becker, 1914, p.14). Becker states that if the elephants were injured, they were devalued. Therefore, he strongly advocates capture of elephants in *kraals*. In his own words, ".....it [*kraal*] prevents to a considerable extent the injury otherwise caused to the animals [elephants] and which depreciates their [elephants] value" (Becker, 1914, p.14). Becker emphasizes to his successor Isaac Augustin Rumpf (1716-23) not to accept defective elephants as well as female elephants, unless they were of large and splendid stature because they had no market demand (Becker, 1914, p.14). Becker also states three ways that the DEIC obtained elephants as: (a) annual tribute (b) presents (c) on payment for those in excess of the tribute by the elephant hunters (Becker, 1914, p.14).

Of the so obtained elephants, the manner of inland and outland transportation had also been described in the memoirs. By the end of the seventeenth century, lack of proper vessels for the inland and outland transport of elephants had been a major problem. Although, the DEIC intended to construct two large flat-bottomed vessels each 20 meters long, 5 meters wide and 1 meter deep, suitable timber had not been available. In the circumstances, proposals had been made for transporting

the elephants overland by way of Negombo, Kalpitiya, Arippe to Jaffna, but that had also not been possible due to various difficulties such as crossing the rivers and obtaining food and drinking water for the elephants during the journey (van Rhee, 1915, p.14). However, by the mid-eighteenth century, the situation seems to have been changed. Both Julius van Gollennesse (1743-51) and his successor Johan Gideon Loten (1752-57) make mention of a roadway that was used with permission of the King of Kandy to march the elephants captured in the south to the Jaffna Peninsular (Loten, 1935, p.10 & van Gollennesse, 1974, p.27).

The memoirs contain conspicuous statements of the tributes of elephants from Vanni. Vanni situated to the south of Jaffna right across the Island and adjoined the Kandyan Kingdom was divided into six provinces and granted to principal chiefs known as Vanniyars (Becker 15). Each Vanniyar was to contribute his share perhaps modified from time to time by the DEIC. Van Gollennesse states that "In return for the rights they [Vanniyars] held in the land and the taxes they [Vanniyars] collected from cultivators in the Vanni, they [Vanniyars] owned the lord of the land [DEIC] certain taxes which for long had been commuted in terms of elephants" (van Gollennesse, 1974, p.27). However, it seems to be that over the years, the Vanniyars had been unable to deliver the fixed tribute of elephants. van Imhoff had made effort to collect the arrears of the elephants due (van Imhoff, 1911, p.38). His successor, van Gollennesse had also been zealous in the collection of the arrears over 190 elephants (van Gollennesse, 1974, p.71).

The particulars referred to in almost all the memoirs convince that trade in elephants was a lucrative item of revenue of the DEIC ¹¹. It had been the second important branch of the DEIC's trade in Sri Lanka as well ¹². The sale of elephants was usually in a public auction opened by the Governor where all the buyers had a chance to make a bid. Such auctions had been at the markets in Jaffna, Mannar, Galle and Matara. Of these, the largest sale was in Jaffna and next was in Galle. The merchants from Golconda, Coromandel Coast and Bengal had come along to purchase the elephants from these sales (Pielat, 1905, pp.28-29, van Goens, 1910, pp.4-5 & de Heere, 1914, p.16).

The memoirs remark on the DEIC's profit in elephant trade as well. During the period from 1646 to 1650, the DEIC had earned 18,652 reals of 48 stivers by selling 22 elephants. The income would have been much higher, had the captured 24 wild elephants not died at the stable during their period of training. It is evident that between 1667 and 1670, out of the total income of the DEIC, 72 per cent was from the sale of elephants. In the eighteenth century, the sale of elephants had yielded an average profit of 100,000 guilders per year; in the first half of the century an average number of 80 to 100 elephants were shipped annually. However, after about 1740, had been a period of rapid decline in the elephant trade of the DEIC in territory of Sri Lanka due to various reasons. The Anglo-French war and the Karnatic and Bengal wars occurred in the mid-eighteenth century was a hindrance to the elephant trade as it prevented the merchants from sailing for export and import trade requirements. Further, the practice of the Vanniyars not paying the tribute on time and also the lack of tamed elephants to control the wild beasts had severely affected the DEIC's elephant trade in Sri Lanka. In the circumstances, it is revealed that the DEIC's trade in elephants in its final decade in the occupation of the coastal region of Sri Lanka, had declined, dropping to annual average sale of 15 elephants (van Imhoff, 1911, p.78, Maetsuyker, 1927, pp.14-15, Loten, 1935, p.37, van Gollennesse, 1974, p.27).

Notes:

1. The Dutch East India Company (DEIC) referred to by the Dutch as the *Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC) was established in 1602. It was a powerful company which remained with a serious trading concern in the East. In order to be successful in trading, the DEIC arranged its Eastern affairs by constructing fortifications, maintaining military forces and carrying on administrative functions through officials of the DEIC. The DEIC displaced the Portuguese in the East Indies who was then handling the trade alliances in the Asian and European markets. Since then, the DEIC handled Asian-European trade affairs enjoying a lucrative transaction between the East and the West until they were challenged by British domination towards the end of the eighteenth century. The DEIC was seriously in bankrupt during this period as well. In the circumstances, the DEIC was eventually dissolved in 1799 (Boxer, 1965, p.24 & McHenry, 1993, *vol. Iv*, p.299).

The interest of the DEIC in Sri Lanka rested mainly on its cinnamon and some other commodities such as elephants, pearls, gems, cardamom, pepper, areca-nut and coconut. The DEIC was aware that it could yield much profit by exporting those trade items to foreign markets (de Silva, 1995, p.58). Nevertheless, if the DEIC was to acquire a monopoly on such trade goods, it was a pre-requisite to establish an element of territorial power in Sri Lanka because the Portuguese were already occupying such power in the Island. The DEIC could easily have proceeded to achieve such goals as it was receiving mutual responses from the Kandyan Court encouraging the visits of its officials to the Island, which commenced from the very beginning of the seventeenth century (Ferguson, 1927, pp.361-409 & 1928, pp.102-179).

By the time, Rājasimha II (1635-87) ascended the Kandyan throne he had had immense harsh experiences with the Portuguese so that his intention was somehow to get rid of the Portuguese from Sri Lanka. The King turned to the DEIC in order to obtain its assistance to expel the Portuguese from Sri Lanka. No doubt, the King realized the necessity of having a superior naval power and military technology for such expulsion than his enemy already possessed. The king's proposal was conveyed to the DEIC and as a consequence, two Dutch envoys appeared before the Kandyan Court in 1637 to convince the king of the required help on condition the DEIC was granted a monopoly of the cinnamon trade (Baldaeus, 1960, pp.91-98). Agreed upon the condition, the combined Sinhala-Dutch forces conquered the Portuguese stronghold in Batticaloa on 18 May 1638 (Maetsuyker, 1927, p.2). Five days after the victory, namely, 23 May 1638, the Treaty of Alliance was signed between the two parties on the 23 May 1638 by which the DEIC was given liberty to enjoy trade privileges in the Island. According to the stipulations of the treaty, the DEIC was to furnish troops for the expulsion of the Portuguese from the Island, for which in return, it was to have the entire monopoly of the trade of the Island except elephants. The captured Portuguese forts were to be garrisoned by the DEIC or demolished '*if His Majesty thought it fit*', with the King meeting all expenses of the war against the Portuguese (See, Joan Maetsuyker, *Memoir of Joan Maetsuyker President and Commander-in-Chief delivered to his successor Jacob van Kittensteyn on the 27 February 1650*. Translated by E. Reimers. In *Selections from the Dutch records of the Ceylon Government*, No. 1, 1927. Colombo: Government Printer. Appendix C, pp.54-58 for the full text of the English translation from the Portuguese of the Treaty of Alliance).

Almost one year's time after signing the Treaty of Alliance, the combined Sinhala-Dutch forces gained their next victory over the Portuguese by capturing the stronghold in Trincomalee (Maetsuyker, 1927, p.2). Subsequently, the DEIC laid siege on the Portuguese stronghold at Negombo on 9 February 1640. Nevertheless, it was retaken by the Portuguese on 8 November of the same year (Anthonisz, 1929, p.48 & p.62). During this period, on 13 March, Galle fell into the hands of the DEIC (Thyssen, 1887, p.76). The DEIC efforts to recapture Negombo was successful on 9 January 1644 (de Queyroz, 1930, p.876). One year after this victory, the DEIC was able to lay the foundation for the establishment of a Dutch territory in Sri Lanka (Fig. 1). Kalutara surrendered to the armed forces of the DEIC on 15 October 1655 (Schreuder, 1946, p.8). Colombo fell into the DEIC's hands on 12 May 1656 (de Queyroz, 1930, p.984). The DEIC stormed the last two Portuguese strongholds, namely, Mannar and Jaffna on 19 February and 21 June 1658 respectively (Anthonisz, 1929, p.169).

Since the total elimination of Portuguese power in Sri Lanka, the DEIC was in occupation of the coastal region of the Island to varied extents until the Peace Treaty of 1766 between the DEIC and the Kandyan Court (Figs. 2 & 3). The implementation of the Peace Treaty placed the DEIC in possession of the entire coastal belt of Sri Lanka until British presence in Sri Lanka began in 1796 (van de Graaf, 1887, p.304) (Fig. 4).

2. For instance, merchants, clerks, soldiers, sailors, medical doctors, predikants etc. The officials so sent were the European personnel from countries like Holland, Germany, Scandinavia, Poland and Hungary. They received the salaries, status and privileges from the DEIC.

3. The Governor was assisted by a Council. The senior officers in charge of day to day civil, judicial and military functions were the members of the Council. The Council Members were responsible to the Governor and the Governor was finally responsible to the DEIC for all sorts of administration in the territory. Both the Governor and the Council were under the supreme authority of the Dutch Governor General and Council in Batavia (Goonewardena, 1958, pp.141-3).

4. Although, the DEIC was in possession of the coastal region of Sri Lanka as far back as 1640s if not before, the nature of its imperialism over the respective area always remained in question as the Kandyan sovereignty was reluctant to accept DEIC's sovereignty in the Island. The Kandyan sovereignty was of the view that the DEIC had no right to settle in the lands captured from the Portuguese but to hand over back to the Kandyan King. On the other hand, the DEIC interpreted the indebtedness of the Kandyan Court to the DEIC during the military campaigns that eliminated the Portuguese from the Island (from 1638 to 1658) as reason to retain the captured areas and consolidate its establishment as a privilege.

At the same time, it must be noted that the DEIC purposely delayed presenting the relevant bills to the Kandyan Court in spite of repeated reminders. Later on the DEIC had presented inflated bills of expenditure, which was far beyond the King's capacity to pay. With such exorbitant claims, the DEIC was able to argue its case successfully, on the basis that it was the King's inability to reimburse all expenses incurred by the DEIC during the course of the military operations, launched to expel the Portuguese from the Island that caused the DEIC to retain the lands captured from the Portuguese without handing over it to the Kandyan Court.

As a result, the conflict between the two parties on the possession of the coastal region was continuously in debate. In the circumstances, the Kandyan-DEIC relations were always strained and the gap was rapidly widening as well.

5. Both Archivists and academics have contributed to translations: R.G. Anthonisz, Sophia Pieters, E. Reimers, S. Arasaratnam and K.D. Paranavitana. The series has included the memoirs of several Commanders, some official diaries, instructions and minutes of the Political Council as well.

6. The DEIC's occupation of the coastal region of Sri Lanka was to exploit the trade articles of the Island which then had a significant demand in foreign markets. Among such various items of trade, the elephants were one of the valuable commercial resources.

7. Prior to the DEIC's interference, handling elephants of Sri Lanka was under both the King and Portuguese. At the beginning, the Portuguese obtained the 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. They also adapted the local set up that was based on service tenure on the basis of caste to meet the requirements connected with promotional activities of elephants as an item of trade. The authority on the wild elephants in the Kandyan Kingdom rested on the King of Kandy, therefore, if the elephants were to be captured from the respective lands, the King's permission was required (Nicholas, 1954, pp.156-158).

8. It is said that the wild elephants were found in the surrounding lands of the Valve river in the Giruva Pattu of the Matara Disavany, the wooded hinterland in Negombo and Ja-ela in the Colombo Disavany, Vanni territories in the northern region, and the area surrounding Trincomalee and Batticaloa in the East of the Island (Nicholas, 1954, pp.159-161 & van Diessen, 2008, p.140).

9. There were certain castes that involved in elephant dealings. For instance *Panikki* were to capture the elephants, *Kûruve* were to look after the captured elephants and *Panna* were to provide food for the captured elephants (Nicholas, 1954, pp.156-158).

10. Kraal means an enclosure built of jungle timber in the appropriate areas of elephant hunting. It was triangular in shape divided into two parts horizontally. The wide entrance into the enclosure at the bottom was the bigger section. The smaller part extended to a narrow passage through the apex. The larger part of the enclosure was for the keeping of elephants that were driven from the jungle. The smaller area consisted of the branches of banana trees, which usually was the meal for the captured elephants. The remaining narrow passage was the place where the wild beasts were imprisoned, one at a time, until they proved to be in firm control. The sizes of the enclosures seem to have been varied (Fig. 5).

11. Sri Lankan elephants were in demand for war operations, transporting heavy goods and ceremonial purposes on state occasions etc.

12. Cinnamon had been the first branch of revenue.

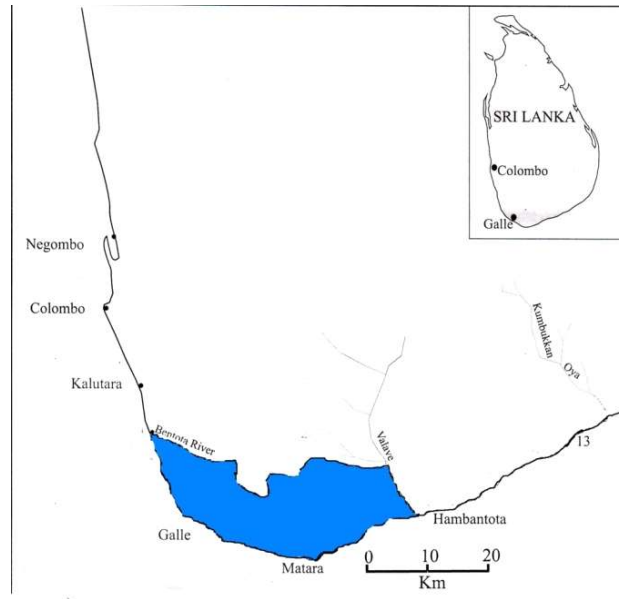


fig. 1
 Source: Winius (1971)



fig. 2
 Source: Arasaratnam (1988)



fig. 3
 Source: Arasaratnam (1988)



fig. 4
Source: Paranavitana (2002)



fig.5
Source: Valentijn (1975)

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