

Disturbances, Riots, Revolt: The Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka in 1796-97

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In February 1796, the British captured the strategic harbour of Trincomalee and proceeded to expel the Dutch from the island. The government of the maritime provinces was vested in the Government of Fort St. George and control in Ceylon was exercised by the military led by Colonel James Stuart. The events that occurred a few months later, in December 1796 have been described as a 'full scale revolt against the new British administration', as 'disturbances' and as 'riots' in the rare studies pertaining to the period that all tend to echo the voice of contemporary witnesses and duplicate the viewpoint of the report of the De Meuron Commission of Investigation.

The events of 1796-1797 have not evoked a sizeable interest among historians of the British period mainly because the official documents of the years 1796-1798 are not available in the Sri Lanka Archives. By far the most details of the events based on primary sources appear in Colvin R. de Silva's *Ceylon under British Occupation* published in 1942, although the focus of his work is inevitably on the colonial administration's response to the revolt rather than on the people as historical agents. My paper will be based on a reading afresh of those documents at the India Office Library in London (in June).

Sri Lankan historiography has rarely addressed the issue of the consciousness of the participants either in the 'revolt' of 1797 or even in the more famed revolts that occurred in 1818 and 1848. I hope to assess the relevance of frames of analysis such as 'moral economy of the crowd', 'autonomous domain of the subaltern', 'legitimation' to the study of revolts in Sri Lanka.

Some of the questions I hope to find answers to through a careful reading of colonial documents as well as the rare petitions written by the 'natives' to the British officials are the following: Was the uprising of 1797 lifted up by a leadership above localism and generalized into an anti-colonial campaign? Did religion constitute a significant component of peasant consciousness? If not why did the people rebel? Thus my paper aims at filling a gap in the scholarship of the British administration of Ceylon of the early period 1796-1802 which remains one of the most understudied periods of the history of the island.

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