

The Consolidation of British Power in Sri Lanka



- * The main objective of this chapter is to acquire an understanding of the establishment and consolidation of British power in Sri Lanka and the constitutional and administrative system which prevailed under them.

The Establishment of British Power

- The establishment of power by the British in Sri Lanka took place in several stages:
 - * The establishment of British power in the Maritime Provinces in Sri Lanka in 1796.
 - * The Maritime Provinces becomes a British Crown Colony in 1802.
 - * The British occupation of the Kandyan Kingdom in 1815.
- * There were two major factors which led the British to establish their power in Sri Lanka:
 - 1 The importance of location of Sri Lanka.
 2. Gaining access to the commercially valuable articles which were available in Sri Lanka.

The importance of location of Sri Lanka

The British who were engaged in the establishment of their power in India needed harbours to anchor their ships. There were several such harbours in Sri Lanka which could be utilized for this purpose. Although India has a very long coast, according to location the harbours in Sri Lanka are more important than harbours in India.

The harbour of Trincomalee in Sri Lanka is unique in its natural location. Because of the existence of a large bay, ships could be protected from strong winds, particularly from monsoon winds. It is spacious enough to anchor a large

number of ships at a time. It was also important to guard the coast of India and to attack the enemy ships sailing in the vicinity during war times. The French who were competing with the British to establish their power in India were also interested in Trincomalee harbour, preventing which was a major factor which led the British to capture Sri Lanka.

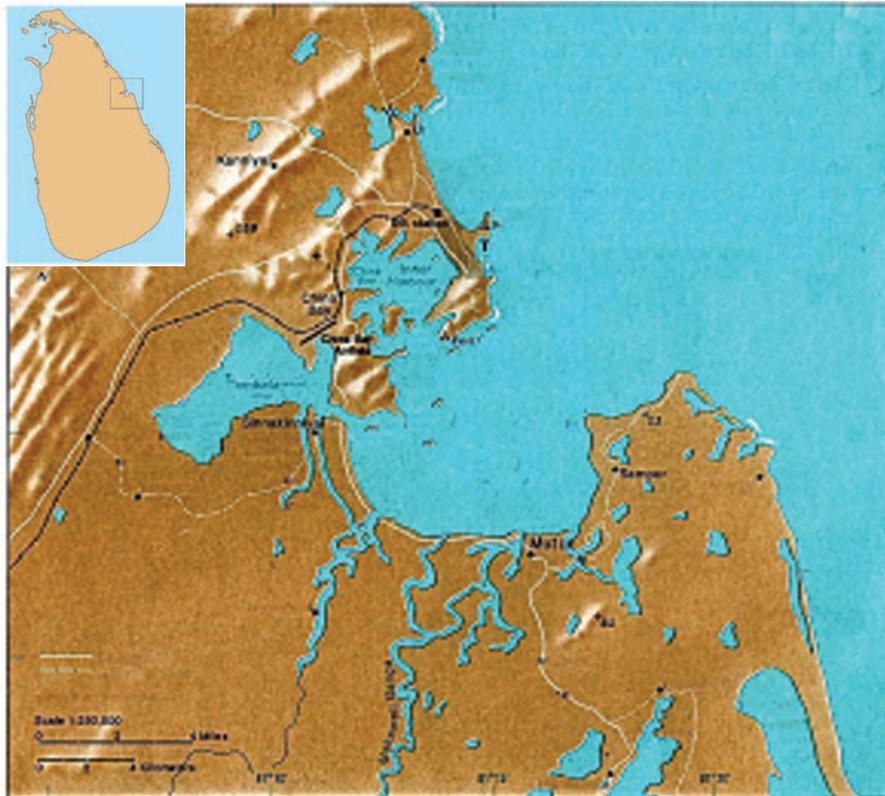


Figure 1.1 Trincomalee Harbour

Commercial Activities

“From the point of view of European traders, it could be said that the importance of the island lay in the fact that it was the main source of cinnamon produced in the Eastern World”

From this statement you would be able to gather an important cause which prompted the British, to consider Sri Lanka as an important country.

Cinnamon was only one of the main commercial commodities which could be procured from this country. In addition, spices such as nutmegs, pepper, cardamom and cloves and other items such as pearls, precious stones and elephant tusks were among the main commodities which the Europeans sought from Sri Lanka.

The British realized that the establishment of their power in the island would be the best means of ensuring the access to these items.

Establishment of British Power in the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka

We know that the French Revolution commenced in 1789. During the course of the revolution France which opposed the monarchies in other countries of Europe, too, invaded Holland. In the face of this invasion, Prince William V, the Stadtholder or the ruler of Holland fled to England.

The British, who were anxious to gain control over Sri Lanka, used this opportunity and obtained a letter from the Dutch ruler, to be presented to the Dutch Governor in Sri Lanka. He was instructed " **to allow the British to take possession of the Dutch territories in Sri Lanka in order to prevent them from falling into the hands of the French.** This letter came to be called the Kew Letter as it was issued from the Kew Palace where the Stadtholder was given asylum. J.G. Van Angelbeck, the Dutch Governor of the Maritime Provinces in Sri Lanka at the time did not obey these orders at once.

The British immediately commenced operations and gained control of the Dutch territories. Having captured the Trincomalee harbour in 1795, the British seized in succession, Jaffna, Mannar, Kalpitiya, Colombo and Galle. By February 1796, all Dutch Maritime were in the hands of the British.

Student Activity

Conduct a class debate among fellow students on the topic: 'Sri Lanka was important to the British because of its geographical location / because of its commercial significance'.

The Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka becoming a British Crown Colony

The cost on capturing the Maritime Provinces was achieved by the English East India Company. As a result, the administration of those Provinces was also entrusted to the Company.

As it will be discussed later in this chapter, under - 'Resistance Movements against the British' - a rebellion broke out against the British East India Company rule in the Maritime Provinces in 1797-1798. The administrative changes made after crushing the rebellion, were the first steps taken in the process of making the littoral a British Crown Colony.

Accordingly, steps were taken to establish a new joint administration in the Maritime Provinces by the British Government and the English East India Company. This system which is called the "Dual System of Administration" was not successful. Therefore, in 1802 the Company was deprived of its administrative functions in the Maritime Provinces which were now made a Crown Colony, and the administration was taken solely under the King and Parliament in England.

The Conquest of the Kandyan Kingdom by the British in 1815

The British made two attempts to capture the Kandyan Kingdom:

1. The invasion of 1803 by Frederick North
2. The invasion of 1815 by Robert Brownrigg

There were several factors which led the British to seize the Kandyan Kingdom:

- * The existence of an independent state in the middle of the country was an obstacle to the British dominion in the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka.
- * The hostile role of Kandyan kings in supporting the anti-British activities in the Maritime Provinces.
- * The gravet duties charged by the Kandyan rulers at the border between the Kandyan Kingdom and the Maritime Provinces were a hindrance to British trading interests.

- * The Kandyan Kingdom had become an obstacle to the overland communication of the British between Colombo, their administrative centre and Trincomalee, their chief naval centre.
- * The British were eager to build a road between Colombo and Trincomalee which had to pass through the areas under the Kandyan King and the King was not prepared to agree to this.
- * The British had to incur heavy military expenditure in order to protect the borders between the Maritime and Kandyan areas.

The First British Invasion of Kandy

King, Sri Vikrama Rajasingha (1798-1815) was the ruler of the Kandyan Kingdom at this time. He belonged to the Nayakkar dynasty, which had been ruling the Kandyan Kingdom since 1739. Hostility against the Nayakkar rulers had been built up for some time. It emerged from among the members of the Radala aristocracy. For generations they enjoyed an immense power in the court, bearing the highest administrative posts, in the government and doing the administration in provincial level. They gained large revenues from the Nindagams, their hereditary lands as well as the lands granted by the kings for their services.

The Role and Activities of the Mahadikarama, Pilimatalaue

Pilimatalaue, the Mahadikarama or the Chief Minister was the leading figure in the group hostile to the Nayakkar king.

According to the tradition prevalent among the Nayakkars at the time, Muttusami who was the brother of the queen of the previous Nayakkar king was the heir to the throne. But Pilimatalaue was successful in the enthronement of Kannasami, whom he considered to be a person, to be manipulated according to his whims and fancies. Kannasami ascended the throne as king Sri Vikrama Rajasingha. Muttusami, who was considered to be the rightful heir fled to the British. However, contrary to Pilimatalaue's expectations it became evident before long that Sri Vikrama Rajasingha was not the puppet whom he could manipulate at his will.

When Pilimatalaue found that Sri Vikrama Rajasimha was not amenable to his wishes, he secretly sought the assistance of the British to depose the king. The British who were looking for an opportunity to intervene in Kandyan affairs, tried

in vain several times to arrive at a treaty with Kandy. Sri Vikrama Rajasingha's opposition to this was the main reason for the failure of their attempt. In these circumstances, the British decided to make use of Pilimatalaue in attaining their aims.

But there had to be a valid reason to wage a war against a state Pilimatalaue mere invitation was not sufficient. However, it did not take much time to find an excuse for an invasion. Some low country traders who had gone to the Kandyan Kingdom had been harassed and arecanut stocks which they had purchased, confiscated on the orders of Pilimatalaue. This was treated as an instance of maltreatment of British subjects and an insult to the British Government. Accordingly, the British declared war on the Kandyan Kingdom.

North's invasion of Kandy in 1803 took place amidst many obstacles, most important being the difficulty in entering the hilly Kingdom of Kandy due to lack of suitable roads. From Colombo to Kandy, there were only foot paths or cart tracks through which people had to walk in single file.

The British army which entered Kandy undergoing many hardships was able to enthrone Muttusami and to sign a treaty with him. But Sri Vikrama Rajasingha, who had fled the capital in the face of the British invasion and was in hiding, He was able to attack the British army and to annihilate it before long. Muttusami was executed Only MacDowall, the Commander of the British army and a few others were able to escape alive. Thus the first British invasion of Kandy, like the Portuguese invasions ended in utter failure.

Although the Governor North's attempt to conquer kandy was a failure ,their hopes of capturing the kingdom did not cease. The British took special care to avoid the shortcomings in the policy adopted by Governor North.

Thomas Maitland (1805-1812) who succeeded North as the Governor of the Maritime Provinces of Sri Lanka was able to maintain friendly relations with Kandy. Maitland, who realized that a conquest of Kandy by war would be very difficult, sought



Figure 1.2 King Sri Vickrama Rajasingha

on the instructions of the British Government to arrive at a treaty with the Kandyan king. In the meantime, he entrusted John D'Oyly, a civil servant at the time, with the task of obtaining information about the condition of the Kandyan Kingdom and the nature of the relations between the king and the Radala chiefs.

Robert Brownrigg (1812-1820)

The next British invasion of Kandy was undertaken by Governor Robert Brownrigg. He combined the use of diplomacy together with military force. John D'Oyly, Chief Translator to Government and the officer in charge of correspondence with the court and the chiefs was instrumental in creating a favourable situation for Brownrigg to invade Kandy. He had acquired a sound knowledge in the Sinhala language and culture and maintained close contacts



Figure 1.3 Robert Brownrigg

with Kandyan chiefs and monks. By employing a cohort of spies he obtained information regarding the military strength, arms and tactics in the Kingdom. He also found out about the relations between the chiefs and the king, the extent of their loyalty to the king, their interests, their weaknesses, the conflicts and rivalries among Radala families and the routes between the Maritime Provinces and Kandy. He also came to know the places where the king took refuge in the face of threats to his life such as foreign invasions, rebellions and conspiracies, and also the places where his treasures were hidden. It is also believed that he provided various kinds of liquor to the king who became addicted to them before long.

The British Invasion of 1815

By 1814-15 Sri Vikrama Rajasingha had become unpopular among the people. The king deprived some Radala chiefs of their privileges while he conferred special privileges on his Nayakkar relatives. He exacted excessive and oppressive labour services from the people under the rajakariya system and meted out severe and

inhuman punishments which were against the Kandyan customs. This resulted in antagonizing the monks, Radala chiefs and ordinary people.

Animosity and conflicts were developing between the king on the one hand, and the Radala chiefs and monks on the other, and a chaotic situation arose in the Kingdom. Rebellions erupted continually against the king. The king exploited rivalries among the Radala families to his own advantage, for instance, by pitting them against one another in the course of making higher administrative appointments. The king inflicted severe punishments on the Radala chiefs who were hostile to him while rewarding those who supported him. In these circumstances, those who had enthroned Sri Vikrama Rajasingha themselves became his bitterest enemies. Pilimatalauve was thus the first to become his main enemy. In 1811 he conspired to assassinate the king. But his plan came to light before it was implemented and he was executed.

Ehelepola who succeeded Pilimatalauve as the Mahadikarama, too was instrumental in raising a rebellion in Sabaragamuwa against the king. The king sent the army to suppress the rebellion but it was not able to take Ehalepola into custody. It is alleged that his wife and children who were kept as hostages in Kandy were tried and brutally put to death. However, according to another view the king was only inflicting punishments in accordance with existing custom. Whatever be the truth of this matter, the result was that Ahalepola was compelled to seek refuge under the British.

This provided an opportunity for Brownrigg who was eagerly waiting to invade Kandy. The immediate incident which led to the British invasion of Kandy was the maltreatment of some Sinhala traders who were trading in the Kandyan territory. They were convicted as spies, an ear and hand of each of the traders was cut off and they were sent back to the Maritime Provinces with their dismembered limbs suspended from their necks. Some of them died on the way, but a few managed to reach home to complain about their predicament to the Governor

Brownrigg described this incident as an insult to the British Government and launched an invasion against the Kandyan King proclaiming that the intention of the British was to rescue the Kandyan people from the cruelties of the king. The British tried to convince the Kandyans that their enemy was not the British but their own king, Sri Vikrama Rajasingha. The British were able to show that their military manoeuvre was not an invasion but an expedition undertaken on the invitation of the Kandyans.

Student Activity

List the causes which led to the emergence of an opposition against King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha.

Let us now turn to the factors leading to the success of the second British invasion.

The protection provided by natural factors existed at this time as in 1803 when North invaded Kandy, Brownrigg did not face much difficulty in reaching Kandy. The main reason for this was the complete absence of any Kandyan opposition against the British unlike in 1803. The guidance provided by Ahalepola was a great advantage to the British. Even Molligoda, who succeeded Ahalepola as the Mahadikarama after the latter fled to the British, did not offer any resistance to the British.

As on the previous occasions, in 1815 too, the King fled the capital and took refuge in a safe hiding place. But unlike on previous occasions, the kandyans who lived with the British captured the King and his queen and handed them over to the British. The people who became enraged at the sight of the king and his queen were said to have grabbed even the earrings of the queen. The jacket which she wore at the time, drenched in blood is on display at the National Museum in Colombo.

The attempt made by the British to conquer Kandy in 1815, thus became successful. All previous attempts made by Europeans - the Portuguese, Dutch and even the British - to conquer Kandy had hitherto ended in failure. The main factors which were conducive to the conquest of Kandy by the British were the development of hostile relationships between the king, the Radala chiefs and the people, and the loss of the loyalty of the people to the king.

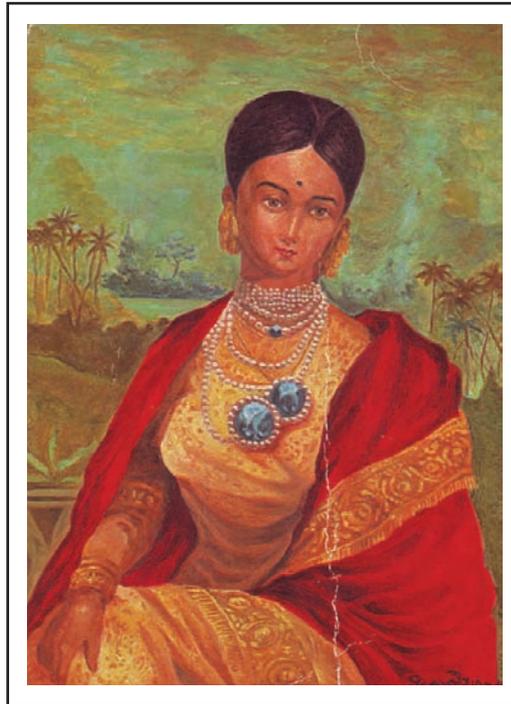


Figure 1.4 “Rangamma” Queen of King Sri Vikrama Rajasingha

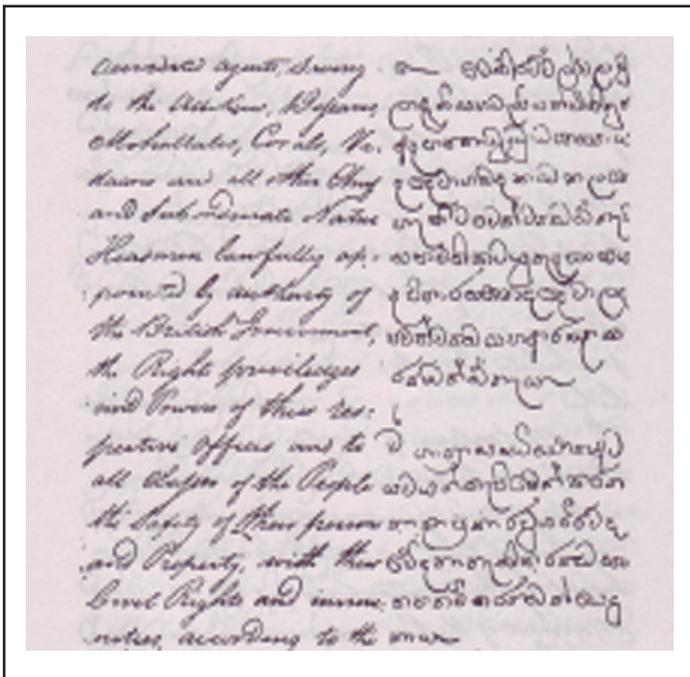
The conquest was followed by a Convention signed between Brownrigg, the British Governor and the Kandyan chiefs at the Audience Hall of the palace of the Kandyan Kings. It was read to the chiefs on 2 March 1815 and actually signed on 10 March 1815.

Ven. Wariyapola Sumangala Thero who was enraged at seeing the British flag being hoisted even before the signing of the Convention was said to have brought it down, trampled it and hoisted the royal flag of the Kandyan Kingdom. This symbolizes the anger and opposition of those who were against the capture of the Kandyan Kingdom by the British.

Student Activity

List the reasons for the success of the invasion of 1815 and the reasons for the failure of the invasion of 1803.

The Kandyan Convention of 1815 marks an important turning point in the history of Sri Lanka. By this Convention, the last existing independent Sinhala kingdom fell to the British bringing the entire island under foreign domination for the first time.



An extract from the Kandyan Convention