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Author(s) Amala Anna Anil

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Travancore and Dutch in 17th and 18th centuries: Relations, Impacts and the Battle of Colachel

Amala Anna Anil

II MA History
Assumption College (Autonomous)
Changanassery
amalaedathua@Gmail.Com

Introduction

The Kerala coast, since time immemorial, has welcomed the various foreign powers and has been shaped by the relations it has had with each other. This essay examines the various phases in the relations with such a foreign power- the Dutch and the mighty state of Travancore. It focuses on the beginning of the Dutch trade endeavours and spice trade with the Malabar coast countries through the Dutch East India Company, the rise of Travancore and its expeditions under Marthanda Varma, the Dutch competition for trade monopoly with other European powers and subsequent clashes, the relations with Travancore and allied countries, the Battle of Colachel leading to the eclipse of Dutch power in India, the fate of the Dutch in church and the transformation of Eustache Delannoy from the Dutch Captain to Valiya Kappithan of Marthanda Varma and its impacts. The essay looks into the works by and from Dutch archives, A. Sreedhara Menon, Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, M.O. Koshy, A. Arul Shoba, Markus Vink, Jeena Sarah Jacob, S. Krishna Iyer and others.

While the Russo-Japanese war of 1905 was projected as the booster dose to Asian Nationalism, many South Asian historians tend to ignore the remarkable victory of Travancore against the Dutch in 1741 at Colachel. It marked the eclipse of the Dutch power in India forcing them to pack off to Batavia. One and half centuries prior to this Japanese triumph over Russia, the tiny state of Travancore disastrously crushed the Dutch power in India; which was practically a red signal for the Dutch to consolidate their position in the Batavian region, rather than wander along the Indian coast. It also exploded the age-old myth that Europeans were invincible.

Since time immemorial, the western Malabar coast of India, opened up proficient possibilities for the European powers to enter into the Indian ocean trade

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network and consolidate their power in the realm of Spice trade. There were in fact hostile competitions amongst the foreign powers to establish their relations with the local princes for their monopoly in trade from the regions. This essay attempts to analyse the various phases in the relations with such a foreign power- the Dutch and the mighty state of Travancore crafted by the blood and Iron policies of Anizham Thirunal Marthanda Varma. The essay focuses on the beginning of the Dutch trade endeavours and spice trade with the Malabar coast countries through the Dutch East India Company, the rise of Travancore and its expeditions under Marthanda Varma, the Dutch competition for trade monopoly with other European powers and subsequent clashes, the relations with Travancore and allied countries, the Battle of Colachel leading to the eclipse of Dutch power in India, the fate of the Dutch in church and the transformation of Eustache Delannoy from the Dutch Captain to Valiya Kappithan of Marthanda Varma and its impacts. The essay looks into the works by and from Dutch archives, A. Sreedhara Menon, Elamkulam Kunjan Pillai, M.O. Koshy, A. Arul Shoba, Markus Vink, Jeena Sarah Jacob, S. Krishna Iyer and others.

The ports of Kerala attracted commerce from the rest of the world since time immemorial. The coastal land had been frequented by the Phoenicians and Arabs and later Assyria, Greece and Rome. The landing of Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498 marked the commencement of a new epoch in Kerala history. The Portuguese took advantage of the discovery of the sea route and controlled the sea-borne trade. The influx of goods from India made the port of Lisbon the emporium of Indian merchandise. The Dutch purchased Indian goods at Lisbon and distributed them throughout Europe. The union of Portugal with Spain in 1580 altered the situation. The Political subordination of Portugal to Spain weakened the Portuguese overseas Empire. In 1581, Holland declared independence from Spain. Philip II, the king of Spain wanted to punish the Hollanders for their rebellion against him by hindering their trade with Portugal. So, he closed the Portuguese sea ports to Dutch trade. The king also laid an embargo upon their Ships.

The ban on Dutch trade with Portugal compelled the adventurous Hollanders to make systematic efforts to find out their fortune in the East. They considered the capture of the Indian trade 'a continuation of her just revolt against Portugal and

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Spain, a heritage from her hard subjection, and the zeal of the independence, which she had so dearly won'. The Dutch achieved the greatest feat in history by turning their 'despairing land revolt into a triumphant oceanic war'. In 1602, the Dutch East India Company was formed with authority to make peace or war with eastern princes, to erect forts, choose its own governor, maintain garrisons and nominate officers for the conduct of the police, and the administration of justice[ii].

The United Dutch East India company began organised efforts to trade with the East after its formation. But in the course of the next fifty years, they founded numerous settlements all along the Coast from South Africa to New Guinea and dislodged the Portuguese from most of their strongholds. The Dutch East India Company concentrated in trade and commerce with Asian countries. The political conditions in the East were not so conducive that they resorted to negotiations, treaties and war. The administrative headquarters of the Dutch East India Company was at Batavia. The Governor General in Council decided all matters. After the conquest of Ceylon, a powerful fleet under the command of Admiral Van Geons started for Malabar in 1600, with the ostensible object of replacing Rajah Vira Kerala Varma of Cochin on his throne, but really to drive the Portuguese away from the Coast[iii].

The coastline of Kerala attracted the attention of the Dutch for its importance in the spice trade of the Indian Ocean. The Dutch policy in Kerala was governed by the singular consideration of procuring maximum pepper at minimum expense. During this time the Portuguese power and influence was strong in the East. This forced the Dutch to seek the assistance of the local rulers against the Portuguese on the coast of Kerala. The task was not easy because the Dutch had to find out the rulers who were hostile to the Portuguese. Besides these rulers must be strong enough to resist the power of the Portuguese. Under its leadership the Dutch organised the local ruler's hostile to the Portuguese offering them assistance. Steven van der Hagen was the first Dutch Admiral to visit Calicut for the purpose. After the occupation of Tangasseri (Kollam) Cochin and Kannur, in the Western coast, the Dutch interests were looked after by a commander to build fortresses, establish garrisons, and conclude treaties. Also as mentioned by KK Kusuman in *Slavery in*

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Travancore, the Dutch seizure of the Portuguese settlements on Malabar coast also seems to have contributed large numbers of slaves in the Dutch's slave trade in the Indian Ocean to places like Ceylon, and Batavia[iv].

The Dutch in the first phases from 1604 to 1697, established spheres of interest which soon became their settlements. The atrocious policies pursued by Portuguese in the Western coast made the Portuguese merchant's persona non grata to the Malayalam speakers. This was also the reason for the shifting of the Portuguese headquarters to Goa. The Dutch traders were always respected and preferred by the local population. Unlike the Portuguese, the Dutch presented themselves as refined, civilized and disciplined. This pro-Dutch atmosphere was exploited to the maximum. The Zamorin of Kozhikode extended a helping hand to the Dutch to capture and establish their predominance in Cochin and Kannur by 1663, by liquidating Portuguese power and influence. Dutch officials gradually became decision makers of the princely state of Cochin. They collected the customs, royal rents, taxes and fines. They interfered in judicial pronouncements and made for themselves a monopoly of trade in tobacco, salt, wheat etc.

The soundness and effectiveness of the Dutch policies made them the most acceptable and the least objectionable power in the Kerala coast by the turn of the 17th century. Van Rheede, the Dutch Governor, recorded satisfaction in entering into treaties with native rulers through military pressures. Also, mutual respect and understanding made the Dutch sign treaties with Venad, Odanadu[v], Thekkumkoor, and Cochin. The Dutch hegemony along the Kerala coast thus became a reality so long as the Dutch militia was on the coast.

Around the same time, from being a small princely state Venad rose to become Travancore, as Martanda Varma established his power in 1729 by annihilating all those who, in the name of patrilineal succession, raised the banner of revolt. By dint of his military calibre, Martanda Varma rose to be the maker of modern Travancore State. Martanda Varma by a policy of conquest, annexation and consolidation enlarged the frontiers of his kingdom from Kanyakumari in the south to the Cochin state up to Karappuram (modern Cherthala).

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The Dutch, who were then well settled in Cochin became impatient because they knew that they would become the next target of annexation. They realised that their policy of non-interference was proved unsuccessful in Malabar polities. Hence Stein Van Gollenesse, the Dutch Governor, decided to change his policies. They realised that Desinganadu could act as a barrier against the increased power of Travancore. Martanda Varma and the Dutch stood face to face. It was a question of the political and commercial hegemony in the Kerala Coast, who was supreme? Van Imhoff personally met Marthanda Varma to negotiate peace, threatening to wage war against Travancore if the Dutch terms were not accepted, but Marthanda Varma dismissed the threat, and replied that he had been thinking about invading Europe someday. When Travancore was not ready for a trade agreement, the Dutch openly supported the anti-Travancore alliances like Desinganadu[vi], Kayamkulam, Thekkumkoor [vii]and others. In this critical situation, Ettuveetil Pillamar[viii] also joined hands with them.

At this juncture, Raja of Travancore, Marthanda Varma, attacked these local powers. While being engaged in his efforts to suppress his political enemies in Travancore, Marthanda Varma had to countenance the cunning designs of the Dutch East India Company who were trying to interfere in the internal affairs of Travancore with similar motive. To strengthen his supremacy, Marthanda Varma signed a contract with the French in August 1740. In the meantime, Van Inhaff, supported Elayadath Swaroopam[ix] against the will of Marthanda Varma, which he recaptured. They also tried to capture the Dutch out-posts in Travancore. The Dutch were humiliated. The victory of Marthanda Varma put the survival of the Dutch in Malabar under great threat. Under these processing circumstances, the Dutch entered into another war with Travancore at Colachel in 1741.

As a statesman administrator, Marthanda Varma sensed danger of a Dutch invasion from the southern side of his kingdom. In other words, he was not unaware of the moves made by the Dutch towards Kanyakumari and Thengapattanam and finally to Colachel. The Dutch wanted to raid and destroy the main source of income of Travancore, the pepper gardens and cloth industry by a direct coastal attack. The Dutch received no reinforcement from Ceylon [x]as expected. The deterioration of

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weather compelled the Dutch to delay further hinterland attack. The Dutch, however, bombarded Colachael continuously for three days and also blocked harbours between Kollam and Kanyakumari. This sudden move of the Dutch compelled Marthanda Varma to seek French assistance, which they readily agreed. Although they couldn't help actually. In the meantime, Travancore also agreed to the English not to disturb the English factories of Anjengo, Vizhinjam and Edava and in return sought to help Travancore against the Dutch. Marthanda Varma advanced upon the Dutch forces at Colachel. With the help of Mukkuvars, Travancore also surrounded the Dutch ships with flame, sunk them and attacked the Dutch mercilessly. The Dutch in Colombo issued orders to protect Kollam particularly their Tangasseri settlement, the failure of which would result in the risk of losing all Dutch grip in the pepper trade in the south. This decision was taken in view of the military setback of the Dutch at Colachel where the native forces proved to be large, well-armed and better placed. On the fateful day of 9th August 1741 the Dutch secured the final shock-destruction of their fort at Colachel with all men and materials[xi].

It was from here that there started the decline of the Dutch power and the upsurge of Marthanda Varma, vested with the glory of the first Indian ruler to defeat a European power. Inclement weather conditions, the strategies of the king of Travancore and the miscalculation on the part of the Dutch as to the military might of Marthanda Varma were the reasons for the Dutch fiasco. The relations between superior-inferior officers of the Dutch were not smooth and they had been overconfident and undermined the military capabilities and resistance of the Travancore.

Dutch's friendship with Cochin, Nedumangad etc proved disastrous for them. On the other hand, if the Dutch had depended on Martanda Varma, their influence in the western coast might have continued down to 1947. They had to pay a heavy price for their erred judgements - loss of pepper trade along the entire Kerala coast. The Treaty of Mavelikara in 1753 marked the complete humiliation of the Dutch and their eclipse as a political power of Kerala[xii].

At last, as the Dutch were driven out from Travancore in different stages, the establishment of British relations with Travancore turned out to be a milestone. In

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the beginning, the British, the French and the Danes made no political demands and were always willing to sell arms and ammunition to Travancore in spite of the protest of the Dutch. When the Dutch power in central Kerala was considered as difficult for them to trade, the relations between the English and the French and the local powers were customarily excellent. As the days passed the Dutch paved the way for the English East India Company to infiltrate into the politics of the native states.

However, the case of Eustachius DeLannoy, a Frenchman, originally the Dutch naval officer, instituted with the objective of instituting a trading post for the company at Colachel, and was captured after the defeat is quite intriguing. On accepting the terms of Marthanda Varma to join his army, he earned trust from the ruler and was subsequently raised to the position of the Travancore Army Commander. Known as Valiya Kappithan, he indeed left an indelible impression in Travancore. He was instrumental in reorganising, modernising and training the Travancore army according to the western lines and also introduced gunpowder and firearms in the Travancore army[xiii]. His military skills, combined with the tactics of the Dewan of Travancore, Ramayyan Dalawa, and statesmanship of Maharaja Marthanda Varma proved very effective in the future military exploitations, annexations and consolidations .He is also credited for the construction and strengthening of the forts and Padmanabhapuram, Udayagiri, Vattakottai, and Nedumkottai. These forts he designed, also held up the advance of Tipu Sultan's French trained army during the Third Anglo-Mysore War till the British East India Company joined the war in support of Travancore. He is also known to have converted Neelakanta Pillai, a Nair palace officer into Christianity and was martyred and later canonised in 2022 as Devasahayam Pillai. Adding to these, DeLannoy's research text from the University of Leiden in Netherlands mentions the major role played by the Mukkuvar community of Travancore, in defeating the Dutch Ships and taking hostage of Dutch soldiers in the Battle of Colachel.

Similarly, when discussing the Dutch Travancore relations, and its impacts, it is also essential to look into the fate of the Dutch in spreading the 'Reformed Religion' in Kerala during the eighteenth century. The Dutch Reformed Church faced a number of obstacles in their attempts at spreading their religion, which they were unable to

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overcome during their occupation of the area. Philip Baldaeus, a priest travelling with the Dutch East India Company at the time noted the manner in which the Dutch East India Company established their rule, and the religious scenario in the region, especially with regard to the Catholics there. In Stephen Neill's opinion, having suffered at the hands of the Spanish in their homeland, the Dutch developed a rivalry with them which drove them to economically compete with the Portuguese with whom they were united under a joint crown for a long time[xiv]. Neill writes that the animosity that came into being in Europe, spilt over into Asian waters. The Dutch believed that removing Portuguese power and the adherence to the Pope was doing the will of God. Politically the Dutch had a fairly strong position in the region. However, with regard to religion they could not assert themselves as much as they would have liked owing to the manner in which the Portuguese had entrenched in the population the Catholic practice of Christianity[xv]. The literature available on the Dutch suggests that the Dutch presence was primarily administrative. Also, the Dutch were allowed jurisdiction over only the Christians of the Latin rite and not the Nasrani or Syrian Christians. Jacob Canter Visscher, describes how on the other islands where the Dutch East India Company had a strong presence, the Dutch missionaries were far more successful because of the lower numbers of Roman Catholics who could impede their proselytising. However from the sources available what comes across rather clearly is the fact that the Dutch, unlike the Portuguese did not have the resources to propagate the religion. The Dutch, in their attempts to make their economic position more stable could not afford to concentrate on religion in spite of their best efforts. The tumultuous history of the Dutch Reformed Church and its movements to other parts of the world through the Dutch East India Company or otherwise is a testament to the religious zeal of the Dutch and their strong belief in the 'Reformed Religion'. It may be the case that in some very inconspicuous way the Dutch left their mark on the Christianity of Kerala, but in Kerala where Christianity evolved under various influences, having a chaotic history of its own, the influences of the Dutch Reformed Religion might just have gone unnoticed[xvi].

Having analysed the various phases of Travancore-Dutch relations in the 17th and the 18th centuries, from the beginning of Dutch trade in the Indian ocean coast of Malabar, the competition and policies of the Dutch East India Company in establishing

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their trade monopolies, and the rise of Travancore, the various issues of conflicts between Dutch and Travancore can be seen. It was primarily concentrated on authority and monopoly over trade. All these events escalated into the battle at Colachel in 1741, which ultimately led to the defeat of the Dutch to Marthanda Varma. It was the first defeat of a European power by an Indian prince in Indian soil, which went even up to the extent of exploding the myth of the invincibility of the occidental people over the orientalists. It can even be said to have heralded an era of sub nationalism as a consequence of which more and more anti-foreign, anti-imperialist and anti-colonial struggles had been staged in many states. On examining the new commercial system of Travancore, it could be seen that the state control over the trade enabled the ruler of Travancore to assert his power and position. He was also successful in checking the Europeans manoeuvring in his kingdom. Above all, the ruler of Travancore could isolate the Dutch diplomatically from their alliance and commitments with the local rulers on the coast of Kerala by timely aligning with British and French. Thus it could also be concluded that the Dutch incidentally paved the way for the English East India Company to infiltrate into the politics of the natives states like Travancore. At the same time, it is also noteworthy to examine the state of Dutch's 'Reformed Christianity' in Kerala and the impacts of an enemy- Eustache DeLannoy turned into the leader of the Travancore army.

Endnotes

1. Batavia was the capital of the Dutch East Indies. The area corresponds to present-day Jakarta, Indonesia.
2. Kumar, Santhosh, L, "Rethinking Dutch Trade Settlements in Travancore,2022.
3. Koshy, M.O, "Native Assistance in the Foundation of Dutch Power in Kerala", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 1988, Vol. 49 (1988), pp. 196-201.
4. Vink, Markus, " 'The World's Oldest Trade': Dutch Slavery and Slave Trade in the Indian Ocean in the Seventeenth Century", Journal of World History, Jun., 2003, Vol. 14, No. 2 (Jun., 2003), pp. 131-177.
5. Present day Kayamkulam
6. Present day Kollam
7. An independent kingdom in the southern part of Kerala in India from 1103 CE until 1750 CE.
8. The Ettuveetil Pillamar (Lords of the Eight Houses) were nobles from eight ruling Houses in erstwhile Travancore in present-day Kerala state, South India. They were associated with the Padmanabhaswamy temple in Thiruvananthapuram and the Ettara Yogam. Their power and

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wealth grew until Marthanda Varma (1706–1758), the last king of Venad and the first king of Travancore, defeated them in the 1730s.

9. Present day Kottarakara.
10. Present day Srilanka.
11. Koshy, M.O, "The Dutch Conquest of Kerala-Compulsion and Considerations", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 1996, Vol. 57 (1996), pp. 239-244.
12. ShobaJini, Arul. A, "The Dutch Struggle for Political Supremacy in Travancore 1700- 1753, 2019.
13. Koshy, 1996, pp. 239-244.
14. Koshy, M.O, "The Trade Monopoly of Travancore 1743-44", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress,* 1989, Vol. 50, Golden Jubilee Session (1989), pp. 312-319.
15. Koshy, 1988, pp. 196-201.
16. Jacob, Jeena Sarah, "The Fate of the Faith", *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, December 2019, Vol. 80 (December 2019), pp. 490-497.

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