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## CEYLON

For 450 years the island of Ceylon (now called Sri Lanka) was the prey of successive naval powers. Colonial conquest of the island was predicated on superior sea power and arms, military organization, political strength, and economic wealth. Popular history has generally differentiated between Portuguese rule (1505–1658), Dutch rule (1658–1796), and British rule (1796–1948) in the guise of first the East India Company and then the British Crown. The “rule“ in Ceylon of these three powers was sometimes nothing more than a presence that grew, spread, or declined in space and time.

## CONQUEST AND CONTROL

In the early sixteenth century, there were three native centers of political power in Ceylon: two Sinhalese kingdoms in Kotte and Kandy and a Tamil kingdom in Jaffna. When the king of Kotte died in 1597, he bequeathed his territories to the king of Portugal, and the Portuguese became *de jure* sovereigns over the lowlands of Ceylon. The Portuguese annexed the north of the island in 1619. Their attempts to invade the kingdom in the mountains in the center of the island met with resounding defeat in 1592 to 1594 and on many subsequent occasions.

The Dutch commercial company, the *Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie* (VOC, or Dutch United East India Company), entered the Sri Lankan scene at the beginning of the seventeenth century under the pretext of helping the king of Kandy wage war against the Portuguese. When the Dutch took possession of the island’s Low Country, King Rajasinghe II (1635-1687)

of Kandy organized a resistance that combined guerilla warfare, negotiation, and attempts at alliances with France and England. After his death, the VOC resorted to force against the Kandyan when they did not cease from inciting the Low Country Sinhalese to revolt against colonial rule.

In 1766 colonial rule in Ceylon was given written sanction when the Kandyan king was obliged to sign a treaty that gave the Dutch sovereignty over the entire coastline of the island up to a depth of one Sinhalese mile (5.6 kilometers; 3.5 miles). From then on, the kingdom of Kandy was a landlocked entity. The British took over the Dutch-controlled territory of Ceylon in 1796, and with an 1815 treaty known as the Kandyan Convention, brought the Kandyan provinces under British sovereignty.

## AN EXPORT-BASED ECONOMY

In the colonial system, the economy was tied to the export of tropical goods and the import of food products such as rice. In the sixteenth century, the Portuguese were intent on building a system of trading and military outposts connected by sea lanes and on gaining control of spice production. In Ceylon they found cinnamon, which they developed by relying on the Salagama people, who were relatively recent migrants from South India, to provide their counters with supplies. The Dutch continued this practice in a more systematic way with the creation of the first cinnamon plantations. The canals they built permitted spices to be transported efficiently and shipped overseas.

Under the British, export trade turned successively to coffee (ca. 1840), tea and coconut (ca. 1880), and rubber



**Ceylonese Chieftain.** A chief from the hill town of Kandy, one of two Sinhalese kingdoms in Ceylon. © HULTON-DEUTSCH COLLECTION/CORBIS.

(ca. 1900). The island became one of the principal plantation colonies of the British Empire with the main areas of production and extraction increasingly located within the territories of the Kandyan kingdom. British production techniques were modeled on those of the plantations in the Caribbean. The demands of the plantation industry required a network of roads linking the interior of the island with the coasts, thus marking the beginning of a modern transportation system. Another ethnic element was added with the arrival of immigrant plantation labor from South India.

There was little interest on the part of the European colonizers for peasant agriculture, although some reservoirs in the dry zone were repaired in the late nineteenth century. On the whole, state policy was inimical to peasant agriculture in two specific areas: the levying of taxes, and colonial policy in relation to shifting agriculture, a system in which farmers move from site to site. Under this system, forest land is brought into cultivation by the slash and burn method and farmed until its productivity falls. Peasant agriculture in Ceylon failed to achieve the dynamic growth of the plantation sector

during this same period, while methods of cultivation remained unchanged.

#### CONDITIONS OF DIFFERENTIATION

Portuguese colonialism did not lead to substantial changes in the native administrative system. When the Catholic Church arrived in Sri Lanka, however, it functioned as the ideological apparatus of the Portuguese colonialists. The arrival of the church therefore marked the beginning of a dark age for the Buddhists and Hindus of the island. Many converted to Catholicism or intermarried with the colonizers, spawning new social formations, such as Catholic Sinhalese or Tamils, as well as people of mixed descent. Converts were exempted from various taxes and generally given preferential treatment.

Portuguese rule also created conditions of differentiation between Kandyans and Low Country Sinhalese—the latter bearing the mark of the foreign presence in their legislation, land structures, and customs. Another significant change came with the upward mobility of certain castes associated with colonial power, especially the Salagamas (cinnamon peelers).

During Dutch rule, a number of natives converted to Protestantism, while interracial marriages created the Burgher community. The Dutch contributed to the evolution of the judicial system of the island as indigenous laws and customs that did not conflict with Dutch-Roman jurisprudence were codified. This was the case of the Tamil legal code of Jaffna (the Thesavalamai) and Muslim law. In the Low Country, courts applied Roman Dutch law, thus modifying traditional notions of property and affecting family structures.

The rapid expansion of plantation agriculture in the mid-nineteenth century was the major catalyst of social change in Sri Lanka. The growth of services to support the needs of the plantations and their workers stimulated the development of the Kandyan highlands and the city of Colombo. A class of local capitalists emerged, especially in the mining and export of graphite and in the coconut plantations. The island's traditional elite landowners, the Mudaliyars, were soon challenged by a new English-educated elite derived from all ethnic groups and castes.

#### THE TRANSFER OF POWER

The British transferred power in 1948 to a conservative multiethnic elite that had spearheaded a mild nationalist movement. The British felt that this group would offer the best resistance to the forces of cultural nationalism and Marxism then gaining momentum in the country. The westernized elites had on the whole been willing partners of the British. What resistance there had been

occurred in the first two decades of the century when the temperance movement rallied Sinhalese Buddhists against the imposition of Christian values. Paradoxically, it was only in 1956 that a powerful nationalist movement would emerge to shake off the remnants of the colonial state.

**SEE ALSO** *Empire, Dutch.*

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