The Bitter Fruits of War, 1670–1679

The original intention was to make of Ceylon a jewel to the Company by obtaining the entire rule of it; but, because of the extreme measures which this demanded, the object could not possibly be carried out, as the flowers from this garden would have cost the Company as much as the once so famous tulips in Holland....

Memoir left by Governor Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff of Ceylon to his successor Willem Maurits Bruynink, 1740.

Were it appropriate to debate such old matters, even nowadays one could argue that the Company should have used that good opportunity [the Tuticorin War of 1669] to state and affirm its claims [on the Madurai Coast] once and for all. Over time, however, wars in general start to become burdensome and the Company had been engaged in war against the Portuguese in this western part of the Indies for so many years, that it seemed to have had second thoughts.

Considerations of Governor Gustaaf Willem Baron van Imhoff of Ceylon regarding the trade of the Dutch East India Company on the Madurai Coast, 1738.1

While the Dutch Republic was engaged in an epic struggle for survival against the combined forces of France, England, the prince-bishopric of Münster and the electorate of Cologne during the Holland War in Europe (1672–1678), Company affairs in Asia during the 1670s were dominated by an interventionist policy on both Java and Ceylon. At the same time, southern Indian politics centred on the struggle over Tanjore, initiated by the successive incursions of the Tevar and the aranmanai into the lands of their northern neighbour. In the process both sides in the cross-cultural encounter came to realise that the price of war was very high indeed. In the words of Van Imhoff, all parties ‘had second thoughts’ and were subsequently forced, be it temporarily or permanently, to adjust their policy accordingly. Similar to the during speculators aggressive investment strategies of the celebrated ‘tulip craze’ of 1636–1637,

1 VOC 11297, f. 29, Consideratien van den raad ord. en Ceijlons gouvr. Gustaaf Willem van Imhoff over de handel van de Gen. Ned. O.I. Maatsch. op de Madurese Cust, 22.11.1738; Memoir Left by Gustaaf-Willem Baron van Imhoff, pp. 84–85. The first citation is an obvious reference to the ‘tulip craze’ of 1636–1637.
who were ruined by the collapse of the market, the ‘extreme measures’ of the Company and Madurai in the 1670s ruined the fortunes of their respective imperialist leadership.

For the Company, the 1670s marked the dawn of a more competitive phase of ‘profitless growth’ in the intra-Asiatic trade and the long-distance trade between Europe and Asia, characterised by the decreasing importance of monopolistic commodities and monopoly positions and increased European (and Asian) competition in ‘non-traditional products’ on relatively open markets. These profound changes, combined with Dutch military adventurism in Java and Ceylon, led to a changing balance of power among leading Company circles. Both the Company Directors and the ‘Batavia-centric’ faction grew increasingly alarmed by the poor results in Europe and the emerging budget deficits in Asia in general and Ceylon and Malabar in particular, resulting from the ‘extreme measures’ of Rijckloff van Goens Senior and Junior. In the late 1670s the ‘Batavia-centric’ faction gained the ears of the Directors in the Dutch Republic and subsequently managed to impose its vision on the Company affairs under the Ceylon administration. The replacement of Governor Van Goens the Younger of Ceylon in October 1679 by Laurens Pijl ended a 21-year-period in which Company policy in Ceylon had been largely determined by the imperialist faction led by the Gentlemen Van Goens.

Military overextension also led to serious problems for both the Tevar of Ramnad and the aranmanai. However, whereas the new Marava ruler Raghunatha Tevar or Kilavan Setupati (r. 1674–1710) managed by the end of this period to put the house of Ramnad back in order, the affairs of the aranmanai under Chokkanatha Nayaka (r. 1659–1682) went from bad to worse, reaching virtual anarchy in the late 1670s. In fact, the ‘abdication’ of Chokkanatha Nayaka in favour of his brother Muttu Linga Nayaka a.k.a. Muttu Alakadri Nayaka in early 1677 (r. 1677–1680) was to be followed by the usurpation of the Muslim commander Rustam Khan (1680–1682).

The expansion of the Tevar into the lowlands of Tanjore in 1670 strained the old Dutch-Ramnad alliance and initiated a series of talks between Company officials and representatives of the aranmanai between 1670 and 1672, both apprehensive to restore the balance of power on the Madurai Coast in the form of a temporary marriage of convenience. This flurry of diplomatic activities proved to be abortive and was followed by a lull between 1672 and 1674. For one thing, the initial military successes of Madurai’s central authorities against the Tevar and their subsequent conquest of Tanjore (1673) made Company assistance seem superfluous and even counterproductive. For another, with investments in the region still relatively small, the Company continued to concentrate on events elsewhere in Asia in what it considered more vital areas. On Java the